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# THE CONFESSIONS OF PERPETUA



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~~THE TRUE~~  
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**THE CONFESSIONS  
OF PERPETUA**

BY

ALICE M. DIEHL



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# I

HURRAH! At last something has happened, and as I am emancipated—a week ago I had my eighteenth birthday—other things are sure to happen, so I shall begin a Diary. I wanted to when I was fifteen, and when I told Miss Grimston (our governess, mother says 'a perfect treasure') she said what a good opportunity it would be to write my impressions on my Confirmation. I said, What should I put after that? She said, Oh, it would be nice to write something about the family, that I should like to read years after.

'Not anything that you do not really feel, dear,' she added in her saint-manner, the one she always uses when she talks to the Dad on his hobbies, which are connected with religion. 'A diary should be absolutely truthful—a true record of what passes within and without the writer.'

Well—I did it, and my poor little diary was like a bombshell thrown into the schoolroom. When she saw it she choked and struggled like a person would, I should think, in a fit. She confiscated the book, and I only got it back on this birthday, three years after, when she made me a solemn little speech which ended up with that she hoped, now, I should see the enormity of what I wrote.

Well, I don't. Either I was to write the truth, or I wasn't. I wrote the truth, and she didn't like it. It was this sort of thing:

*'May 20th.—I was confirmed yesterday. The Bishop stopped here—the same that married my eldest sister Isabel to the nasty old Duke, who would kiss me one day—such a slobber—and when I said I would tell Bellona, as I called her (Isabel is just like the statue in looks, and the goddess of war in her ways), he said that would be very ungrateful to him, as he had only been going to beg me to say what present he might have the pleasure of presenting to his dear little sister. He is an old man, after all, with blear eyes, and has been married three times, the first Duchess leaving him children, one of whom is a grandmother already; so I don't suppose he meant much—I mean, of course, if he had been a younger man I should have slapped his face. When he asked me what I should like, I said a pony—I was using Flo's, and it is getting old. You should have seen his face! They say he is stingy, and I know Bellona has to fight to get him to buy everything she wants, so I said, quickly, 'Not an expensive one, only Flo's pony is getting old.' He looked quite relieved, and said, 'Oh, I didn't understand! I was afraid you had been losing at bridge, as your sister does.' Gracious! He is an oddity! But my mare Sheila is his present, so I forgive the slobber on the stairs.*

*'But I have wandered from the Bishop and my Confirmation. He stopped here and had a room which the Dad declares was used for Bishops when this house was really a priory, full of friars. Bellona and her Duke were invited to meet him, but not Flo and her husband; mother said they are far too frivolous. The chef was told to be on his mettle, and all day the smells on the*

back staircase really made my mouth water. Miss Grimston scolded me for alluding to them. I have noticed she is always cross on dinner-party days, even when she does go into the drawing-room to play accompaniments afterwards. She says they invariably send her up a worse supper when they have heaps of the nicest things. When I was telling Flo that, she said, 'Silly old thing, she should square the chef ! It would be a bit of an outlay, but it would pay her in the long run.'

'I have wandered from the Bishop—he isn't the sort of person to fix one's thoughts; but really I have not wandered far, for every one was talking of the lot he ate. That he drank port I know. I was sitting opposite him at dessert, and his nose was red at the tip, and he kept smiling across at me, and when he came up into the drawing-room and the Dad took me up to him for his 'blessing' before I went to bed, it was just as if port were being poured out all round. Nice smell—I really like it. Now, spirits do smell nasty. I was worried all night about my dress. It only arrived the last thing, and Miss Grimston, being still cross about her supper, wouldn't let me try it on. However, it was all right. It was thin Liberty silk, and looked more like a big baby's long-clothes robe than a girl's frock—mother had ordered it to be made to look young, and it did. But when it was on, and I was all covered with a tulle veil, I might have been a bride. Then we went to the parish church (the living is in the Dad's gift, so it is just as high as it dares to be), and I had a *prie-Dieu* in front, because the other candidates were village boys and girls—it would have

been horrid to be close to them. As it was, I could smell nothing but onions. I was so interested in the Vicar and Dad's antics inside the Communion rails that I couldn't think of much else. But when the Bishop laid his hands on my head, I did, with a vengeance! For the pearl pin through my veil had slipped, and ran into my head. It really did hurt, and spoilt the rest of the day, and although Miss Grimston and I dined downstairs, there was still such a sharp pain that I couldn't enjoy a thing. The Duke chaffed me unmercifully because I was so solemn, and I wished the pin had run into his old bald pate instead of mine. This is the truthful account of my Confirmation. I wonder what Miss Grimston will say if she ever sees it, and whether she really expected me to feel church-servicy, as the Dad always does.

*'May 25th.—The next thing, as Miss Grimston said, would be to write something about the family, which I should like to read years after—'*

H'm! I really feel as if I had been so overfed by family—as if I had been so surfeited with Dad and mother and Bellona and Flo and the Duke and Flo's husband and Miss Grimston—that when the great day comes for me to be married I shall want something fresh, not to go back upon the old things. However, perhaps some one else may be amused to read a truthful account of them, so here goes:

'The Dad is a baronet, Sir Eustace Dedcote. When his father died he found everything mortgaged, and such a lot of debts that he had to give up his ideas of being a 'celibate Priest'—as he once called it when he lectured us upon what he had given up for his dead

father's good name and for our existence—and to marry a fortune.

'He found one—a woman with a fortune. Mother was the widow of a soap-boiler, or a pinmaker, or something, and had had a big dowry from her father as well. What *he* was I never heard, and don't want to know—every one shirks that subject, I see. Well, mother is plain, she is stout, and stoops, and she wasn't very much better-looking when she was married, at least Miss Grimston, who was at school with her, she being a tiny child and mother one of the biggest girls, says she wasn't. But she fell in love with the Dad. Now, he looks like an elderly vulture—pale, with sunken eyes and a bald ring just where vultures have it, and his big nose might be a beak. But, by a portrait which mother had painted soon after they married, he wasn't as queer-looking and bird-of-prey-like then. As soon as he paid off everything, he began to re-build Dedeote Priory, which was almost a ruin. The unsafe parts were pulled down and the 'community chapel' was restored—I have heard mother tell people it cost thousands. Religion is the Dad's hobby. He belongs to the lot who did away with pews and hassocks and three-deckers and whitewash, and 'restored' old decorations, replacing comfortable pews and cushions with rush-bottomed chairs—they are in the church and the community chapel where we have Matins, as the Dad calls it, and when they scroop upon the tiles they set my teeth on edge. Instead of hassocks, we have tiny, miserable little mats. I said to one of the maids who was cleaning a marble floor one day, 'You have a much better

thing to kneel on than we have in church,' and she turned up her nose and said she 'would leave at once if the housekeeper arst 'er to use them 'orrid things.'

'The Duke said our chapel is a gem. Mother says the money that has been spent on the reredos and rood-screen and pictures and images and vestments and altar-linen and candles and things would have raised a troop of soldiers like the Dad's great-great grandfather did for King James and got his baronetcy.

'Mother's one idea is "blood." I don't think her family had any to speak of. But she thinks a lot of the Dad and his forebears, and kept on talking to us girls as far back as I remember of what a great thing it was to have blood. I heard it, when Bellona, who is eight years older than I am, was holding her wool to be wound that hour before dinner we went to the drawing-room, and Flo, who is five years older than me, was sitting on a stool by mine and listening.

'Bellona took it all in—for she got the Duke to propose at one of her very first balls, and married him as soon as her trousseau was ready. I held her train with the Duke's grandson, and thought she looked like a stone queen in Westminster Abbey. She certainly is a grand creature, six feet in height, with fine aquiline features, great, hard eyes, polished stones they look like, and rivers of thick hair which take her hairdressing maid over an hour to do up. She never looks any different whatever happens, and I fancy this is what makes the Duke so obedient. He is a small, shrivelled man, and goodness knows what he likes—perhaps it is waylaying girls of my age and

slobbering them—but when Bellona says a thing must be done, it has to be.

‘Bellona goes farther than mother, who rests satisfied at Blue Blood. Bellona’s idea is Royalty. She spends her life in scheming to get Royalty to their shoots in Norfolk, and would die of disappointment if she could not get a Prince to stay for deer-stalking and the rest of it in their Highland shooting-box. Mother thinks all the world of Bellona. Then comes Flo. Flo’s marriage was managed by Bellona. Flo went to stay at the Duke’s and came home engaged, with red eyes and a grand diamond ring. She cried dreadfully; all I could find out was because Lord Wendell had been ‘wild.’ She has not looked happy since, till a month ago, when she came to stay here without him.

‘She was in the highest spirits, and I had never seen her looking so pretty and enticing. I wondered, for I had gathered, keeping my eyes and ears open, that she had not been getting on well with her husband of late. When I asked her why she was so jolly all of a sudden, she laughed and said that “she and Reg had agreed to differ, and that it was great fun.”’

Here endeth my first Diary. Miss Grimston demanded to see it, and I had to stand and deliver. Patience! It was an uncomfortable day. The lectures! Now I look back it seems as if she had lived lecturing me ever since. But nothing matters now—I am free—free! She is staying on as my ‘companion,’ with a little secretarial work for mother, as they put it. ‘Until you are married, dear, I shall be on the spot to advise and warn you,’ she told me, with her saint-

smile (it shows the gold-fittings of her third set) and and in her saint-voice. 'Then, you will have a husband to lead you aright—' She jumped, for I laughed. I could not help it, when I thought of Bellona and her Duke and Flo and that 'rake' of a Regy.

'Thank you, Miss Grimston, but I shall not marry; men are not good enough,' I said—then 'exit Elinor Perpetua,' as they put in the plays.

I really don't want to marry just when I am tasting freedom. The misfortune is, *they*—the commanders-in-chief—seem all agog to get rid of me to the first eligible who comes along.

I know it for a fact—because the other day I was going into the white drawing-room to try over a song I found among Flo's old music in the canterbury, when I heard my name mentioned in the alcove—a sunny bit, built out from the drawing-room, where the Dad sits sometimes after Matins to read the paper (the *Guardian*, or the *Church Times*—nothing nice, with the newest breaches of promise and other interesting things in of that kind). There is a pale blue satin *portière*, and they were hidden by that—but when I heard my own name I could not help stopping to hear—how could I? I am one poor, ignorant thing against so many who are 'in the know'—how can I defend myself if I have no idea what the plots against me are?

'I am greatly exercised in my mind about Perpetua,' said my father, with a groan like one of his groans when he reads the Old Testament. (I was christened Perpetua to please him; my first name, Elinor, mother had me have after her own mother.

'And pray may I ask why?' returned mother 'drily,' as writers call it. (She speaks in a snip-snappy way when an argument is on with the Dad.) 'Miss Grimston is quite satisfied that she will be married, and a good match too, before we can look round. And she ought to know! She brought up Isabel and Flo, and think how well they have done! The dear Duke, and that brilliant Regy!'

My father sighed. 'Dorothea' (he always calls Bellona that) 'would have been far happier with the good Canon,' he said.

'I really think we women ought to have a say in the matter of our husbands,' exclaimed mother. 'I chose both mine, and although in both cases there have been terrible drawbacks, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. Here I am, alive to tell the tale, although every one thinks me a living miracle after all I have had to put up with.'

That meant the first fling at the Dad's religious fads, so I was off! But I had learned something—that at least my mother was inclined to let me say 'no' if the Dad wanted me to be Mr Canon or Mrs Dean Somebody. I must be thankful for that much 'saving grace.'

## II

THIS is to be a real Diary, so I must leave off hop-skip-and-jumping, and 'behave' (Miss Grimston's adored word). Something has happened to me—and it seems to have left its mark. Do what I will, I *can't* forget him—I mean it, the something that happened—oh, of course, the 'incident.' I think that's the right word.

The day had a first incident—an unexpected visit from Flo—otherwise Lady Wendell. (The 'brilliant Regy' is Lord Wendell.) I had heard discussions between mother and Miss Grimston as to my bringing-out. I gathered that Grimmie (her schoolroom name with Bellona and Flo) had declared me too 'unformed' to be brought out in town, presented, and all that, without a country rehearsal—and I knew that my sisters had been written to on the subject. So, when Flo appeared that sunny spring morning—I was trying over a love song she used to sing in the white drawing-room, and taking me by the shoulders she gave me a little shake and cried, 'Imitating me? Don't, Nell! I'm a fraud'—I believed what she said, that she had come on my account.

'But, wherever from?' I asked, wheeling round on the music-stool and thinking I had never seen her look so pretty. She was dressed in pale pink cotton and there were roses in her fantastic, rose-colour lined hat, under which her pretty features were tinged with a

delicate pink. Her large blue eyes were softer, somehow, and her lips red and pouting. 'You delicious creature—you look good to eat!'

'Learning to flatter?' she asked, just as mother came in all agog, wanting to know why she came, where she came from, and all in a breath. It seems she was staying at Lord Treverton's, at The Chase, about a mile from here—the Dad can't bear them, so mother and Lady Treverton leave cards on each other once or twice a year, and continue to regretfully decline each other's invitations. Regy is not with her.

No, she could not possibly stay to luncheon—she had promised to be back—she only came to say how sorry she was she could not by any possibility give a dance for me for the next month or two. 'As you know, our houses won't do balls,' she added. 'Bellona is sure to be able to—and the house is so big she can have a regular party. Old Diddles likes Nell—she's about the age for him, old sinner; you'll find he'll shell out handsomely. But why doesn't the Dad let you have a ball here? She's the last one to settle in life. He might stretch a point.'

My mother shrugged her shoulders and looked grim. 'No one would come—no one worth anything,' she said. 'What with the chapel and the services at the church, and giving the Dower-house to the Sisters, and their ringing bells at five in the morning, and all that, he has got himself a bad name, and I have to put up with it. I don't mind never having anybody here but clergy who want subscriptions and curates out of employ who want to be kept, myself—but it has been

hard upon you girls, and I did count upon you, now you are so well *rangé* yourselves, to help poor Nell.'

'I expect poor Nell will be very well able to help herself,' said my sister, with a laugh. Then she talked of her successes at bridge. It seems that just when I ought to have a coming-out dance she has a house-party who care for nothing but bridge.

'But—you said Regy would be away?' asked my mother, astonished.

'He hates house-parties, and is taking the opportunity to go to Paris for a fortnight,' she said, looking at her watch-bracelet—a beauty, all pearls and diamonds—and jumping up. She had been sitting on the arm of a saddle-bag chair, swinging her foot, which looked awfully pretty in silk lace stockings and shoes to match her frock. I watched her. (I must try to imitate that pose.) 'I must be off, mother—oh, I can't run in to see the Dad. He wouldn't let me go—and I have promised to be back.'

She was walking—she had come through the woods. I offered to walk a little way with her. At first she did not seem to want me—then, all of a sudden, she said, 'All right, come along,' and before I knew where I was, I was out of the house, had crossed the lawns, and was in the shrubbery.

'Do you mean to pelt along like this all the way?' I asked, stopping to get my breath—for my chest felt as if I had been lassoed and the lasso drawn tight.

'No, no, of course not!' she said. 'Only I wanted to have a little talk with you, you poor child! I do pity you, with the Dad and mother and Grimmie all giving you false ideas of life!'

'How do you mean?' I asked,  
'Ch, well—it is difficult to explain. Only I warn  
you—get away from here as soon as possible. Make  
some man marry you who is desperately taken with  
you—and then, lead him an awful life—spend his  
money laugh at him in public, encourage him to go  
out and play the deuce with himself—he will adore  
you, and give you the top brick of the chimney if  
you want it!'

'Oh, Flo!' I was 'completely staggered,' as they  
call it.

'I mean what I say,' she went on. 'At least, I mean  
this much: don't let yourself take a fancy to any man.  
Keep your heart tight, lock it up, hold it hard between  
your hands, and encourage an eligible man as much  
as your ideas tell you to. Nell—I swear this to you:  
if you allow yourself to love a man, he will be your  
tyrant—he will hate you! They cannot help it, these  
men! It is in their very nature. The loved women  
are those who don't care a snap what the man does,  
whether he lives or dies, and even when you can't help  
loving a man, you must hide it—you must never let  
him see or know it—at your peril!'

'Flo! You can't mean it,' I gasped. 'Why—every-  
one says there is something called love. . . .'

'Bah!' She stopped and kicked away a pebble.  
'Fiction! Lies! Rot! You say I married for love?  
Thank the powers I did not, or I should be dead. . . .  
There, there, don't look so horrified! I have spoken  
too plain—you and I must have another talk when I  
am not so strung up. We women are creatures of moods,  
Nell! And I am in a predicament, and the person who

has got me into it doesn't seem inclined to help me out. It makes one feel bitter. Ta-ta, dear! I will write you—take care of yourself! You must not come a step farther. There was a tramp hid in a wood the other day—they were all talking of it last night—and a girl came along, just as you might do, and he saw glimmers of jewels, and sprang out, knocked her senseless, and robbed her of everything valuable. Don't come any farther—promise me you will not!

I was rather impressed by her manner, she really seemed anxious, even distressed, so I stood watching her until the path was lost between the trees—then turned back. I was not quite at ease in the wood then. Her tale had sounded unpleasantly true, so I took the first track I could see, to the left, and made my way through the brushwood until I came to a big gap in the hedge. In another moment I was in the open.

It was a big field, sloping down to the hedge, beyond which were other fields. This one, called Sevenacres, was sown with wheat this year, and seating myself on a bank under the hedge, I looked—with the exquisite sensation young growing things give me—at the tall blades waving in the warm wind.

Somehow Flo's talk had given me a sort of shake. She never was one to tell tarradiddles when it wasn't necessary, and I'm sure it wasn't necessary to tell me a lot of stories to frighten me. In one breath she advised me to get some one to marry me, and in the next she abused men wholesale. However, after a minute I began to feel as happy as I did when I began to sing that old song of hers. It was about love—and the music seemed to tell more about it than the

words. The melody haunted me as I sat there, looking at the beautiful green corn waving and the leaves rustling in the sweet air which seemed to bring up the scent of the daffodils and spring flowers from our gardens below. The singing of the thrushes and blackbirds was like a twittering accompaniment. **And—I am free!** I felt, as I looked at the clouds sailing across a sky which seemed like a big, kind smile, somehow as if my wings had begun to grow. Not wings to fly to heaven and sit harping on the clouds. **No**, wings to fly all over the beautiful earth and see everything, and enjoy everything—and find out all about Love. For all this tells me it is not 'fiction,' 'lies,' 'rot,' as Fló said. Everything in the spring seems to me to be in love with everything else.

Just then, just as I was thinking that, I heard a crashing and scuffling in the bushes, then the hedge behind me crackled, and out jumped a man.

I sprang up and gave a frantic yell—before I saw that it wasn't a horrible, dirty tramp with a blue-red, hideous face and leering eyes, as I thought it would be, but a man of my own class in a shooting-suit. He begged my pardon profusely—he had lost his way, he began,—he wanted to return to Harpington (the nearest village).

'I thought you were a tramp, and might knock me down and rob me, as a tramp did a girl the other day,' I stammered—I trembled all over, and my heart leapt everywhere about my body as if I had fifty hearts instead of only one.

'I am awfully sorry,' he said in a deep, kind voice. 'What can I do? You can hardly stand—do, pray,

sit down again where you were sitting.' He put his arm lightly about me and sat me down as if I was a child that couldn't walk. It was so nicely done it quite revived me. 'And now—will you have a little restorative?' He drew a little silver flask from his pocket. 'I was rook-shooting yesterday.'

'Oh no, thanks, not spirits!' I cried, making a face at the flask.

He laughed, and showed beautiful, strong white teeth—his own, you can always tell a third set anywhere! 'I would not have dared offer a young lady spirits,' he said. 'I have a thimbleful of sherry—'

I waved away the flask with a Bellona-like gesture.

'I am not a young lady,' I said distantly. He was looking at me with such an intent look in his fine gray-blue eyes, that as he had wrinkles and I judged him to be elderly, I remembered the Duke and his ways and thought I had better take care. 'I belong to this place. But you do not. You are trespassing, and you would not like to be prosecuted, would you?' I pointed to the warning to trespassers hung on a Scotch fir a little way off.

What do you think he did? He sat down by me, and laughed. 'You cannot mean to send me away until I am sure the fright I gave you has not done you any harm,' he said, as if he were begging for something.

'I am quite all right, thanks,' I said. 'But I shan't be, unless you go away. If I had been told this morning I should be sitting under this hedge talking to a strange man I never saw before I should have said—' I was going to say 'rats,' like my esteemed brother-in-law Regy, but happily stopped myself in time. 'I

mean, I should have been utterly and completely shocked.'

(I patted myself on the back for remembering a favourite expression of Miss Grimston's. I uttered it with an emphasis as much like hers as I could make it. I used to run away when she said that. I hoped he would—but he did not.)

'I don't think you are a girl of ordinary flesh and blood, do you know? Are you the spirit of the woods?' he asked.

'Her attendant, perhaps!' I said gaily, 'You must have met the spirit of the woods—all dressed in rosy garments, a lovely girl—no, woman—but she looks a girl! Didn't you?'

'No,' he gravely said. 'I was wandering about, and caught sight of something gold shining in the sun—it was your head—and I felt as if I were magnetised, I didn't think twice about it, but plunged through the brushwood—and here I am! You have summoned me, Spirit. What are you going to do with me?'

'Send you back to the place whence you came!' I severely said. (That phrase always impressed me when I was hiding to read the Law cases.) 'Please go!'

He sighed—a great big sigh. 'If only you knew, Spirit, what you were sending me back to you would not say that,' he began in a miserable tone. I felt he was amusing himself at my expense, so I repeated my advice. I don't know whether he heard. He did not seem to.

'I don't feel as if I could stir from this place till I know what you were dreaming about when I watched

you from behind that old oak yonder,' he said, nodding his head towards a tree which had once been struck by lightning, in the wood. 'There was an expression on your face which meant—well, I want to know what it meant!'

'You are bold—impertinent!' I cried, edging away from him. 'No one has ever asked me what my thoughts were before!'

'Because, dear child, nobody cared,' he suddenly said, flinging himself across the turf I had receded from, and laying his hand on mine—it was a brown, thin, strong hand, and held mine so tight I felt powerless, somehow. 'But, do you know, while I was watching you I felt, I knew, you were unlike ordinary women and girls whose only idea is to do all the harm they can to us men, then snap their fingers at us and fly away. . . .'

'Don't talk against women, please!' I said, wrenching away my hand. 'We are much better than you men! It was about you men, if you must know, that I was thinking just before you gave me that fright. I had just heard a terrible indictment against you all!' (I thought that favourite expression of the Dad's a neat quotation just then.)

'Indeed?' He looked mockingly up in my 'face.' 'May I ask from whom?'

'From one who ought to know, for she has been married some time now,' I judicially said. 'Nor is she in the habit of telling stories. She must have suffered quite dreadfully, for she warned me—' I proceeded to tell him as much as I thought good for him of Flo's denunciation.

He groaned, or pretended to groan—somehow, I felt he was acting and it irritated me. 'You need not pretend you do not believe me,' I went on. 'Or you may if you like. I was warned against men by this lady who knows. She is afraid for me, because I am just coming out. In London? No. I think, at a ball, given by a brother-in-law of mine in another county.'

'Thank you a hundred thousand times for telling me that!' he exclaimed. 'For I shall be there!'

I jumped up. That was a little too much. He evidently took me for a fool.

'Good-bye—and thank you for nothing,' I disdainfully cried. 'First, you frightened me, now you are trying to make game of me.'

'I give you my word I am not,' he said—he had risen, and seemed desperately in earnest all of a sudden. 'You dear, sweet child—you have charmed me so much that I will either be at your first ball or perish in the attempt!' With that, he made me a low bow, and went—vaulting over the hedge and crashing into the wood.

'He was in a marvellous hurry all of a sudden,' I thought, hot with annoyance that I had 'given myself away'—and Flo too, for the matter of that—when I heard a 'cooee' farther on in the wood. It was in a woman's or a boy's voice, and as I listened, wondering if it could possibly be Flo calling me back, I heard it again and again. While I was listening I forgot to bother about the strange man—for Bellona and Flo used to cooee to one another in the grounds, and I could not get it out of my head that it was Flo cooeeing, and that she wanted me for something.

'If he goes that way they will meet,' I thought, 'and he will know who said all that about men! He is so audacious that he would just as soon speak to her as not! What one of those men will do once they will do twice. I have seen that much with the Dad, who goes on buying his religious toys as if he hadn't any, and he's got so many vestments and banners and things that he keeps on giving them away.'

I stood listening for a few minutes, then walked leisurely home—a sadder and a wiser girl. There was nothing much in my 'incident'—I daresay Flo would shriek with laughter and call me a 'hopelessly precocious youngster,' as she had sometimes done, and I have never found out why. But I could not forget it. I could not forget him as he looked when he flung himself on the turf and stared straight into my eyes with a yearning look like a dog's when he wants a bit of what one is eating—I kept on feeling the clasp of his brown, thin hand.

Of course, I forgot the whole thing for hours at a time, but that made it all the worse, for now and then I remembered everything suddenly and all together with a little shudder—first I was a little sick with shame at having been so forward with a strange man, then I felt that I should like to see him again, if only to explain how it came about that I talked to him like that without knowing in the least who he was! A gentleman, most decidedly, even if he has no Blood, but is mixed up with trade, like poor mother before she married the Dad. And kind, oh yes! His eyes are very kind. I should like to see him again—

especially if he turns out to be some one nice from mother's and Miss Grimston's point of view.

'May —th.—I am punished—I have actually dreamt of the man, and two nights running! The first was nothing much—I was out walking with the Dad and the dogs and we met him and I smiled and he took off his hat and stared unutterable things—but the Dad was inwardly praying or something, for he didn't notice. But last night's dream has made me feel in a fever—annoyance at being haunted like that by a casual man I may never see again, and a sort of horrid longing to meet him just once more—to feel the touch of that lean, hard, brown hand. . . .

What a dream for a poor, innocent girl to have, who doesn't want to have men friends or lovers at all! I call it cruel that we can't prevent ourselves from dreaming. We can fall off to sleep with any kind of thoughts and go dreaming of everything which has nothing at all to connect it with our waking ideas.

That is just what happened to me. I had been thinking of mother and Bellona—why Bellona answered a letter of mother's which I know was about me by inviting her at once—how mother, who has gone to Skye Castle—she never refuses to visit at 'the dear Duke's,' *alias* 'dearest Archie'—is bringing Bellona to her way of thinking, et cetera. Those were my waking ideas. Then I fell asleep—and found myself sitting by a lake in a garden—more a 'pond' than a lake—it had lovely water-lilies all over it that hid the water. By me was that man. How he came I don't know. But I felt quite delighted. We were alone, and some lovely music was playing somewhere—and

he took my hand and held it, and looking into my eyes said, 'Darling! . . .'

It gave me such an exquisite thrill that I woke up. But so sweet was the scene, the faint, beautiful music, the touch of his hand, the look in his eyes, the sound of his voice as he said 'Darling,' that I tried to fall asleep again, and get the dream back. Of course, I could not—my experience is that although one is sure to dream bad dreams over and over again, it is simply impossible to work oneself back into a nice one. I could not get to sleep again, I was as wideawake as you are when the doctor tells you that sleep is the one and only thing to do you good. So I let myself think of him, instead. Of course, I shall never see him again, but I should like to know who he is.

The Dad lives with the top of his head in heaven, hoping he has one foot in the grave. It was no use asking *him*, and I believe Pexton, my maid now, mother's second maid previously, is bound down to give an account of everything I say to her at headquarters. But I rode out on Sheila to-day with Margles, a sharp youth who was Flo's groom before she married. (When she left she said, knowing I should inherit Margles, 'He's a knowing one, and has his head screwed on straight—but he's open to a bribe, Nell, so don't trust him too much.') I thought of that to-day, as he put me up on Sheila, and as I rode off. Who could bribe him in this case? What harm can there be in asking one's groom a few questions? I decided to ask him about that house-party at Lord Treverton's—perhaps *he* was a visitor. So, when I called him up to examine Sheila's hoof—I thought she was going a bit

lame—I casually asked him whether he had seen 'Miss Flo' when she was staying at The Chase. He had a sort of glow come on his snubby features—he looks a jockey, and his parents were training him for one till the doctor said they'd kill him if they went on, so he began with us as second groom instead. 'I allers tries to see Miss Flo—beggin' 'er parding, 'er Ladyship w'en she's about 'ere, mam,' he said. 'I see 'er fust a-motorin' with Colonel Delincourt, leastways as Colonel Delincourt's motor brought 'er and another lady and gent to The Chase I expeck as it was Colonel Delincourt. There was two in the motor. One, a young gent, was drivin', the shuffler sittin' as gran as a hemporor at 'is side, and there was Miss Flo and an old gent with a white beard and a slouch 'at by 'er side in the tunnel, as they calls the car. That was all the 'ouse-party at The Chase, Lord Treverton's second groom, as 'is a friend of mine, ses. But they've been a-dinin' and a-lunchin' of the neighbours.'

'Oh,' I said. Then, as Margles could not discover the smallest stone in Sheila's foot, I started in a canter, and exercised my mind violently as to the identity of the 'young gent' who was 'drivin' 'Colonel Delincourt's' motor.

Could he be my adventure—my 'incident'? Perhaps! But, even if he and the motor-driver are one and the same, it cannot signify much to me. I may never, in this world, meet him again!

### III

SKYE CASTLE, *May 2-th.*—How shall I describe all that has happened to me since I came here a few days ago? A few days—and Life has changed—utterly. I have to pinch myself to convince myself I am the same girl!

When mother returned from her week-end visit here she was in such a good temper that I knew Bellona had promised to give a ball for me. I shrewdly suspected, too, that Bellona, who is a born matchmaker, and managed to marry Flo to Regy, has some *parti* up her sleeve for me. Well, let her have it! I am determined to have my own way in *that*, and not to be made miserable for life by others' interference. Meanwhile, I acquiesce in whatever arrangements mother condescends to inform me about—mostly arrangements for this 'coming out' ball. Bellona, it seems, is thought a lot of in Society—I expect Society respects her for managing her naughty old Duke so nicely that he is more thought of now in his old age than when he 'flourished,' as history terms it. This country ball is quite out of order, socially. 'But, as dear Isabel said, we only want the pick of society for Nell's debut,' related my mother, over our *tête-à-tête* tea in her boudoir. 'Only the very best people will be at your first ball, dearest child! And now, as to your frock.'

She enumerated numberless *confections* suggested

by dressmaking firms with whom she has corresponded on the subject, but I hardly listened. 'There is only one kind of frock I will wear,' I said, with determination, thinking of my strange dream, 'and that is, a white, gauzy, filmy thing, with water-lilies or some sort of water flowers—and it is of no use trying to make me wear anything else, for I simply *won't*.'

My mother looked scared—her mouth worked a little as it does when she can't absolutely dictate to this person or that.

'Of course, my dear child, your wishes must be consulted as to your toylette for your day-butt.' She must have been greatly put out by my manner, or what I said, or both, to risk French expressions Anglicised with her amount of ignorance of the language, before me!

I had my way. The 'toylette' for my 'day-butt' was of the finest silken gossamer over rich, though thin silk. It billowed about me, with here and there a water-lily holding the billows together. My mother gave me a string of pearls—otherwise I wore no jewels.

We arrived at the Castle the afternoon before the evening of the ball—my ball. 'Dearest Archie' was on the platform, and tucked me under his arm as he piloted us to the two-horse landau—mother hates motors. He grinned and wagged his old head at me as his splendid pair of bays covered the distance—I fancied they trotted their supremest best to show they were not quite wiped out by petrol—and when we were walking up the steps to the grim old portico he informed me that he had simply been mother and

Bellona's victim in the matter of my entrance into Society.

'I have spent money like anything—no expense has been spared,' he said in his hoarse old voice. 'And all I ask in return is just a few dances with you! You, child, you are so full of life and youth that it seems to flow from you, to infect every one! I know that when I have been with you my youth returns, I feel a boy again! Such is your delightful gift!'

'You may feel a boy again, but that doesn't make you one,' I said, disgusted. He had never looked so blear-eyed and mottled. 'Years lived through are there—hanging to us—we cannot cast them off however madly we may try to!'

'There is something in that, I dare say,' he said. 'Meanwhile, I am not too old to open the ball with you, as I hope to do. Your sister wishes it.'

Here we entered the great hall, and I sneaked off at once to Bellona's favourite drawing-room. She only meets Royalty on the threshold. Every one else has to be received by her in her own rooms.

But she wasn't there, so I ran back, and found her with mother in the 'great hall,' as it is called—a lofty stone hall with an arched roof, all shadows, and long stained-glass windows and a stone floor with beast skins and trophies of old armour, shields, battleaxes, and things against the walls, and oh! such horridly uncomfortable chairs. But Bellona has had a few old oak settees covered with bear and tiger skins which make the place look half like pictures in *Ivanhoe* while it looks half like an old chapel.

Tea was being brought in by those tall footmen in

the Skye livery—a kind of chocolate colour, with silver buttons and white pipings; they remind one of the chocolates with white cream inside when one undoes them from their silver papers. Bellona was standing talking to mother, and was handing mother's cloak to a maid with that royal commanding air of hers. She looked taller and grander than ever—I really think holding her head so high always must make her *grow*—and she wore a regal kind of gown—satin brocade, mixed puce, and pale brown with silver thread woven in. She looked haughty, and, I fancied, put out, but she smiled as I came up, and put her cold cream-coloured cheek to be kissed. It felt hard and chill, like marble.

'So you have come,' she began, one of those inane remarks people welcome one with when one is a bit of a bore—as one always is to people who are their own gods, like Bellona. 'I was just saying to mother that the idea of the baby of the family coming out makes me feel quite *old*! But sit here, by me, and have some tea. Then Archie wishes to take you to see his new pigs, if you care to go.'

'Of course she cares to go with her old play-fellow,' croaked Snuffles, ambling in and dragging one of the ancient wooden chairs to the ancient table cut short in the legs, where Bellona was displaying her flashing diamond rings as her large white hands manipulated the silver urn and the teapots. (She never drinks tea unless she brews it her self.) 'Don't you, Nell?'

I was obliged to say I did. Not that it mattered much, for Bellona was holding forth to mother about the 'tremendous task' it had been to 'get up a country

ball in the height of the season.' It seems that to oblige her some of the best people have stayed on a few days after their Whitsuntide recess at their country places and have got their visitors to remain, and others are motoring down and won't even stay the night—return at once. Bellona didn't turn her head when her lord and master trotted me off.

The gardens are vast—too grand, big, and stand-off for my taste. The terraces and lawns and walks look as if the only people who walk there ought to be in hoops and powder and jewels and mittens, with waving fans, and bewigged and bedizened beaux ambling at their side. I told Snuffles so when he asked whether I would go through the gardens to the piggery or take the short cut. 'I feel out of place, somehow,' I said.

'You can never be out of place anywhere!' he gallantly said, putting his hand on my arm and giving it a little squeeze. 'But I used to dislike these gardens myself at your age. In fact, I hated the Castle. I should have liked to live at the Home Farm—always got away to the bailiff and his wife when I could! I was more thankful than you can think that your dear sister approved my having a model farm—thought it quite right, as Royalty did not disdain to breed creatures and compete at the shows. I have taken a good many prizes, myself.'

The short cut to the farm was across a corner of the park. Snuffles insisted on my seeing some of his prize cows and bullocks—beautiful creatures certainly. Then we passed the poultry yard, and I saw the poor old cock, who had been fighting with the young ones,

and who, with his right eye blinded, his leg lamed, and his wing broken was moping in a pen all alone.

'Poor old chap, he reminds me of myself,' said Snuffles, with such a melancholy sigh that I felt awfully sorry all of a sudden. 'I am a nobody now with the ladies, my dear girl—although once they ran after me—I was the fashion. Only now and then a kind girl like you pities the old man, and gives him a dance, or a few words. It's all the young men—just like the hens, the women are. When the young cock arrived and fought that poor old beggar they flocked after him young, old, and middle-aged. The old un hadn't a friend among them left.'

After that, I determined to dance with old Snuffles as much as he wanted. Why not? I should be giving more pleasure to him than to the conceited young fools who would be expecting me to admire them.

We were to dine entirely alone, and without ceremony, in tea-costume, if we liked, and dress afterwards. The great dining-hall was arranged for supper, the breakfast-room for refreshments. When we went in, I had only a few minutes to make myself tidy, and to proceed to Bellona's morning-room at the other end of the house. She has a suite of apartments all to herself, as if she were a queen—and they are really beautiful: the morning-room is a small dining-room, oak-panelled, carved ceiling, old paintings, Turkey carpet on the polished oak floor, mediæval furniture. It was delightfully cosy—only the butler and a young footman waiting—and exquisite table decorations—white wild flowers in silver vases in compliment to me. Bellona wore a Greek-looking robe, I had on a white

silk and gauze tea-gown, and mother one of her 'ponderous monstrosities,' as Flo calls her best gowns. I never knew poor old Snuffles quite so nice. The menu was delicately chosen. I don't know whether mother had quite enough to eat, for she was hungry after her journey, but Bellona informed us that she had ordered our dinner according to her ideas of what an ante-dance meal should be, so we ate our tiny cutlets and little messes obediently, only I did hope that Bellona's idea of what a post-dance meal should be, would not prove quite so severe.

However, I was glad afterwards that I left the dinner-table hungry—I got so fearfully excited while I was dressing. It was not only my dress, spread out on the bed—gauzy silvery stuff caught about with small water-lilies, and reminding one of a lake in the moonlight—but while Pexton was getting very hot and flurried over my hair—she has a spotty face as a rule, but as I watched her getting redder and redder in the glass I thought presently she would look like nothing so much as a red-currant pudding we used to have for the schoolroom dinner when there were people to luncheon and we had dinner in the schoolroom—there was a knock at the door.

I cried, 'Come in,' and the door opened, just a chink and a male voice said, 'Is Mrs Pexton there?'

'Oh *dear* me,' said Pexton. But I told her not to mind, but just to go and see who it was, and she came back with a cardboard box in her hand.

'Something for you, mam; shall I see what it is?' she asked.

'Oh! Give it here,' I said, and I jumped up, cruelly

regardless of the half-finished state of my *coiffure*, and I cut the string, and dived into the box, and brought out—well, I never saw a lovelier sheaf of flowers—forget-me-nots, water-lilies, and orchid-looking things whose names I ought to know only I don't and, queerest thing of all, a wonderful ribbon of silver tissue tying the flowers together.

For a few moments I exulted. Then my spirits suddenly fell to zero when I remembered it could only be Bellona, or the Duke, or mother, or perhaps the Dad, to make up for his refusing to be present to-night—it was some real or fancied fast-day. I was returning to my chair, somewhat crushed, when Pexton, who was diving in the box as she always does before sending empty boxes to their limbo, wherever that may happen to be, suddenly brought me a large card—not a visiting-card, but a thing with silvered edges, on which I read in a bold, masculine writing :

‘To the Lady of the Woods, from her humble servant. B.D.’

‘Dear me, it is a little joke of the Duke’s,’ I exclaimed, as if I had known something about it beforehand. But my heart began to beat wildly, incessantly. I knew it was from *him*. Heavens! And he had said he would be present at my coming-out ball . . . then he was somebody—somebody Bellona thought enough of to let him come.

How my pulses beat—how the blood rushed wildly, madly, through my veins! For a few minutes I felt a kind of intoxicating emotion—not exactly joy, nor

hope, nor delight, nor anticipation. No! Something stronger than all those emotions combined. It was a whirl of feeling—I could neither see, nor hear, nor speak properly. When it subsided I gave a frightened glance at my reflection in the glass, fearing that Pexton had noticed something. To my relief she was bending down, quite absorbed in her work, taking hairpins out of her mouth (nasty habit that) and sticking them wholesale in my nearly finished hair.

When she said, 'I think and hope that'll do, ma'am,' and waited my *fiat* anxiously, I knew that she had been too taken up with what would, I suppose, be to her an onerous task, to notice how the arrival of the posy affected me.

But while she was busy at one end of the room I was having a good look at the card before hiding it for the immediate present.

I liked the handwriting. I liked *his* having remembered me. Of course, there was a chance that, after all, it was not that man. But the odds were with me in my hope that it was.

'Yes,' I truthfully told myself, as Pexton dressed me as if her life depended upon how she turned me out, 'yes, . . . there is no doubt about it, that man in the wood has made a frightful impression upon me.'

The coming ball was entirely altered for me. When I arrived I looked upon it as a sort of function to be gone through like one of the solemn dinner-parties at home when the guests are either deans or Father Somebodies. Now—oh, heavens! I suddenly felt I could not face going into the room for *him*. If he were

not there I certainly and surely should not be able to hide the awful disappointment!

I got a little better when mother came in, all propriety and prunes and prism—her best diamond necklace and hair-sprays on—and smirked at me through her long-handled eyeglass, which she adopted for occasions, as she walked round me and gave a pinch here and a twist there—all wrong, I know, she hasn't an idea about dress. Then we went down together—she never having noticed my flowers—perhaps she thought they had been sent with the dress to complete the effect. It would be just like her to think so.

The house was all lit up when we went down the 'grand staircase'—the old one, embellished at an expense which would alarm ordinary people to hear about. Already, people had arrived. I saw men standing about chatting to each other (they were mostly ugly and middle-aged) and slim girls and huge or skeleton mothers emerging from the room set apart for the ladies and joining their men to walk with them into the ballroom.

I must confess that I never saw so many plain people together. Although mother is such an ordinary-looking person, and the Dad like an elderly vulture, Bellona and Flo were beauties, and somehow I had begun to expect beauty in people. Our grocer is a marvellously handsome man, and has wonderfully good-looking assistants; and the baker would really look fine in dinner-dress; the butcher looks like an old Dutch portrait; the village girls are mostly nice-looking. I could not compliment Bellona on the comeliness of the kind friends who had put themselves out

to be present at my 'preliminary canter,' as Regy said it would be when I last saw him. I went into the ballroom, my hand on my mother's plump arm, feeling my spirits damped—my exhilaration gone!

I looked all round the room—I stared intently at each man not absolutely expiring of old age—but they were a mean-looking lot, one and all. *He was not there.* Then the horrid idea came to me. What if he had done it as a practical joke? I thought he was laughing at me all the time that day in the wood. I was feeling quite ashamed of being alive when Snuffles came up, grinning and rubbing his hands.

'Isabel had a quadrille to open with—I told her it would be following a royal fashion—so come along! We take the top. That man at the side who is so like an old monkey is Sir Raymond Rollit, member for the county. He is dancing with the Countess of Hunter, lovely creature, once! I remember—oh, well, never mind. Here we are!'

While he was mumbling and jumbling things together like that, he was piloting me to the head of our set. Just as the music clashed out from the musicians' gallery at the side opposite the long windows, I happened to look towards the door, where Bellona had been standing before she took her place opposite us with young Lord Aglen—the youngest peer present, I afterwards learned—and—all the blood rushed to my head—my foot slipped—I owe it to good old Snuffles' past experiences, I suppose, that he gave me a little jerk under my elbow and prevented me from sprawling full length on the slippery floor.

*He was standing just inside the door, watching us all!*

## IV

'THAT was a near shave, girlie,' said good old Snuffles as soon as he had a moment to speak to me. 'Is the floor too slippery for you? Surely you had dancing-lessons in your ball-room, or isn't your parquetry in proper order?'

'So-so,' I said, as lightly as I could, and I complimented him on his presence of mind, which made him chuckle. After that, I was so desperately anxious to find out who *he* was that I had to cast about how to get at it. It obviously wouldn't do to ask Snuffles point-blank. So I got at it in a roundabout way. I began by saying, as we walked about after the quadrille was over, that if I had had to make some comment on my first *coup-d'œil*, at my first dance, I should certainly have said that I was surprised to see that men had gone off in looks from what they used to be.

'Fie, fie!' he cried, evidently pleased. (He must be in his second childhood, such a little pleases him.) 'How can you tell what we ugly old men were, years ago? We may have been almost as plain then as these fellows here to-night are!'

'That I know you were not,' I warmly replied. (I was getting wild with anxiety, I could not wait.) 'For instance, time cannot spoil fine features. Look at your eyes and nose, for instance! Any one can see what you must have been!' (Heaven forgive me for this—I don't think I shall ever forgive myself!)

'Naughty child! Very naughty little child!' He snuggled up to me and giggled inwardly. 'Never, never say that to Sis, eh? You won't? Of course not! You and I are pals, aren't we? Birds of a feather? If only I were as young as one of these johnnies I would teach you something! But there—I must remember you're a dear little white soul, mustn't soil its wings! No! But, joking apart, lovey, you must not be quite so fastidious or you won't be married properly. Why! A good many here are thought regular lady-killers—so attractive.'

'Never!' I said incredulously. Then I coaxed him to show me one or two, giving me signals, squeezing my hand, which I chose to leave on his arm in a bygone fashion, as we lounged backwards and forwards, when we happened to pass them. One—that I should have to record it!—was *him*.

'Not that tired-looking creature?' I said—annoyed with the man—for he must have seen us pass, but never so much as gave us a glance.

He laughed outright. 'Lord! You are too funny!' he said, as he actually wiped away tears. Those old men are objectionable—fancy having to cry when one laughs! Why—don't you know? He is a *persona grata* at Flo's house—inveterate at bridge—an old chum of Regy's. That means—well, club and cards and billiards all night. I often think what her Grace would say if I dared to go the pace, married or not married, as poor Flo's Regy does. But there! Poor Flo consoles herself, and, 'pon my word, I can't blame her!'

Here I saw Bellona, magnificent in gold-coloured

satin and the celebrated Skye diamonds, beckoning to Snuffles. He was going at once, when suddenly my man appeared from nowhere, and actually laid his hand on Snuffles arm, speaking to him in a low voice. At first, Snuffles pretended not to understand—I saw it was pretence—then he brought him up to me.

‘Nell, this is a great friend of Regy’s and of Flo’s—Colonel Delincourt,’ he said, and hurried off to obey Bellona’s summons.

Colonel Delincourt! The man who motored Flo down to the Treverton’s! I seemed to myself to freeze, stiffen, ossify. I stared at him as if he were some monster on exhibition. At least, that was how I wanted to stare at him.

‘Colonel—Delincourt?’ I coldly asked, raising my eyebrows till the flesh tickled underneath. ‘There must be some mistake! You are the gentleman who frightened me in the wood the other day.’

‘But my name is Delincourt all the same,’ he began; then he smiled, showing those beautiful teeth and smiling with his eyes (how fascinating it is! how do people do it?). ‘Surely you must have heard your people mention me? I am an old friend of Lord Wendell’s, and Lady Wendell is kind enough to honour me with her friendship.’

I could have screamed with anger at having been humbugged by him; I could have flung my posy of flowers at his head and dared the consequences; but a look in his eyes, the sad dog-wanting-pity look, dispelled all my rage—it was *just* rage, I am sure! ‘You ought to have told me, that day in the wood,’

I sternly said, drawing myself up. 'You had no right to pose as a stranger, and let me talk to you of my sister as I did when you knew her all the time!'

'I have thought that, myself, since, do you know—in fact, it has worn me out with remorse. I behaved shabbily, but really, your apparition—so unearthly, so sweet and lovely, therefore unreal—seemed to send me daft—made me positively idiotic!' He spoke in low, pleading, most fascinating tones.

'It did,' I told him, assenting with all my might. 'Still, one must remember that idiots can't help being idiots!'

'I am glad you have come to that conclusion—I did, some time ago,' he said, giving me another pleading stare. 'We must talk over my unfortunate idiocy. Meanwhile, this is your ball. I have been manœuvring and planning how to be here—how to secure the exquisite delight of being your partner. This—surely you will dance it with me?'

I hesitated. Perhaps if I had waited to ask myself questions I should have said 'No.' As it was, I allowed him to take me towards the centre of the room—to put his arm about my waist. Perhaps the lovely melody of that waltz hypnotised me.

I shall always think, whatever happens, that there is some spell which at once begins to work when a man you like very much—like better than any one alive—puts his arm about you, especially when he dances as Colonel Delincourt dances. I felt a thrill, just like a slight electric shock which tingles pleasantly through one's nerves, as I felt his arm, his hand—that lean, brown hand which clasped mine that day in the wood. But when we clung together, as one—when we swung

slowly round to that beautiful entrancing music—all thought or feeling of a shock was over. I calmed by degrees—and what was it calmed me? I will be true—I will not write down a lie while I record my poor little life and its incidents—that which sent all violent, adverse feelings flying was a great, warm satisfaction that my own identity was meeting another and being merged into it.

‘Are you tired?’ Those were his first words to me—spoken tenderly, slowly, as we halted. We looked into each other’s eyes—and from that moment there seemed perfect understanding between us.

‘What a question—when I love dancing, and have been waiting countless ages—or what seems countless ages—to indulge in it,’ I laughed. He laughed too, and we waltzed round and round, barely stopping to take breath, until the ‘coda’ began and the couples gradually slackened and left off, one by one. Then he quietly walked me off to the far end of the room, where some chairs and settees were placed among clumps of palms and big ferns that looked as if they grew there—Mr Scott, the head gardener, is renowned for indoor landscape gardening, if one can call it that—and brought up one chair for me behind a clump, and another for himself. He squatted down before me, and actually took possession of my flowers, which I had picked up from a side-table as I passed.

‘You knew they were from me?’ he asked insinuatingly.

‘I did not,’ I replied. ‘How could I?’ My eyes flashed.

‘Don’t annihilate me altogether!’ (He laughed—

what a pleasant, satisfied laugh the man has!) 'I meant to say, I am sure you must have suspected they were from me—if you saw those words on the card—'

'I certainly did not dream that D. stood for Delincourt,' I gravely said. 'I was led to understand that Colonel Delincourt was a white-haired old gentleman—the one who motored down to The Chase with my sister—F—I mean Lady Wendell.' (I was not going to call her 'Flo' to him.)

'You mean to tell me that "F—I mean Lady Wendell" never mentioned me to you?' he asked. 'No? Oh, of course—you are only just out of the schoolroom, and she has been married some little time—'

'I have seen my sister often, but she never breathed the name of Delincourt to any of us,' I replied. 'No! It was the Duke who told me, just now, that you were a great friend of my brother-in-law's, one of those who are up all night at the club, playing bridge and billiards, and I dare say worse games than that—games you can lose fortunes over!'

'The Duke said that of me? Wretched old sinner—I'll be even with him! But, joking apart, I am delighted you sneer at gambling. Some of the most delightful women I know in Society are simply being ruined by it! Men can stop at a thing—sometimes—but it seems to me women can't.'

'Oh! Can't they?' I said scornfully. When I thought that he was actually a friend of Flo's, who plays bridge for money, and that he dared talk of women who play like that, I felt hot all over. 'If you you cannot recall that nasty speech about my sex, I

shall have to show you myself that at least one woman can stop at a thing. I will stop dancing. Not with you? Oh yes, particularly with you.'

'I have not asked you yet, have I?' he innocently said, the same mocking glance in his eyes I had been suspicious of that day by the wood. 'Oh! I am only chaffing—Regy is your brother-in-law, so you must understand chaff! I am not going to ask you for as many dances as I want, I am going to take them. Kindly give me your card.'

The cards were exquisite little things attached to silver daisy safety-pins. I involuntarily put my hand over mine. 'I shall not, thanks!' I cried.

'What a delicious child you are!' he sighed, and leaning back, supported his chin with one gloveless hand. Somehow, the sight of that lean brown hand gave me an inward jump like that I have felt when I have been very much startled.

'I am not a child, now,' I gravely said. But my voice was thick. It always is, after that inward jump.

'I dare say, now, you don't think yourself an untruther, but you are,' he slowly said. 'You told one when you said that eventful day of our first meeting that you were not a "young lady." You said it in a way which meant you were some farmer's daughter or something—and now—you know you are a child—a child to the world of us miserable sinners, thank the Lord!—a child with that tremendous gift which we all covet.'

'I have no especial gift that I know of,' I said. I liked him best when he seemed really in earnest, and his voice left off being tenor and became baritone.

'No! Those who have it don't value it as they ought, more's the pity!' he said, with a sort of bitterness. 'Youth—life—to enjoy, to enjoy every day—every hour!'

'You must have done that, you look so tired,' I said. 'Other men here do, too, I noticed that,' I quickly added, for he simply 'looked aghast,' as they say in books. 'But no one quite so tired as you—which is natural, if you and Regy have sat up all night, night after night, at the clubs. Day sleep is not the same thing as night sleep, except when one is ill in bed, when it seems the only thing that does one any good. That reminds me——' I rattled on, feeling rather uncomfortable, he looked so queerly at me—'I do wonder how you manage to be friends with my brother-in-law and my sister at the same time, because she gave me to understand they were going different ways.'

'Ah—well,' he slowly began. 'You see—Regy had got the bridge fever rather badly, and he didn't want her to catch it from him, so he kept his engagements rather dark. She didn't quite understand his leaving her alone so much, and we, his friends, not quite so bitten with play as he was some little time ago, tried to make time pass pleasantly for her. You see?'

'Is that why you motored her down to The Chase?' I asked. It was a sudden idea.

'She and I were invited to Lord Treverton's at the same time as General Treverton, his uncle, and I placed my Panhard at their disposal,' he said, less agreeably than he had hitherto spoken. 'But—as my friendship with your people seems to interest you so

much, I hope to tell you all, from A to Z, as soon as I have the privilege of writing on those spotless pages, your sweet, innocent mind. . . .

He stopped short. Two persons came round the corner, old Snuffles and young Lord Aglen, Snuffles talking loudly.

'Hallo! Here you are, you young witch,' he began, 'I have been hunting for you all over the place. Lord Aglen would like this waltz with you. By rights you should be my partner, but I give you up to youth this time.'

'I fancy Miss Dedeote is engaged to me for this dance, but I am willing to obey her wishes in the matter. Would you allow me to see your card, Miss Dedeote?' (This, dryly, from *him*.)

I was obliged to unfasten it—he took it to the nearest electric light, and I saw his right elbow move—he was, I felt sure, writing his name just where and how he pleased: and when he gave it me back, saying that he had written over where he had put his initials, there was hardly an uncovered space.

'Can Lord Aglen have this dance? The next three are mine, Miss Dedeote,' he said in a colonel-like voice.

'Not, of course, if Miss Dedeote prefers declining'—Lord Aglen, nice-looking, fair, boyish, blushed and wriggled—I am sure he felt interfering with an older man rather badly. As I went off on his arm I felt quite sorry for him, and tried to be pleasant. Indeed, I danced to the end of the number with him, desperately impatient though I felt when I saw *him* standing in the shadow near the musicians' gallery talking to another man, but watching us. I wondered where

Lord Aglen had learnt dancing—he held me so tight, and I didn't like to make any remark—I thought it might be a new fashion, but how inferior to that *he* dances in! That light, firm touch, so strong, yet so tender!

'No, thanks, I will not go to the refreshment-room—I think I should prefer returning to that corner,' I replied to the boy's youthful suggestion of refreshments, or rather, champagne. He seemed quite taken aback, and as I walked about with him a little, watching all the time for my 'Man in the Wood' out of the tail of my eye, I asked him a question or two. He seems to have lived dancing, in Paris as well as London, and was so amiable as to tell me that my undulating movements reminded him of French ladies he had danced with. 'At the Élysée, I suppose?' I suggested, but he looked blank, and said, 'Oh no,' adding that he advised me, when I was married, to go to Paris and to insist upon my husband 'showing me everything.'

'If one wants to enjoy life, Paris is the place!' he said enthusiastically. My dancing having reminded him of his French experiences accounted for the silly, sentimental way in which he pleaded for more. Luckily, at 'the crucial moment,' as I have seen it expressed, out came Colonel Delincourt from his shady retreat. He lounged across the room, and stood talking, with a nonchalant air, to some other men until we came by, when he intercepted us.

'My dance, this, I believe, Miss Dedcote,' he said dryly (that expresses his way of speaking before his fellow-men), and he escorted me to the centre of the room, where he began to dance with me in a matter-

of-fact manner, without a single word. I was afraid he might have thought it was my fault that Lord Aglen held me so funnily, and I felt I could not bear him to think badly of me; so when we stopped, and he said, 'Where shall I take you?' in rather a cool tone, I suddenly thought that it would not be too pointed if I suggested heat, and iced water: and I did.

'That extravagant sort of dancing has done you up,' he asserted, rather than suggested. 'I will give you something to put you right. That young jackanapes ought to be shot!'

'I certainly don't like his way of holding one,' I said, as I accompanied him to the breakfast-room, where the refreshment buffet was. (I had not seen it, and hardly recognised the place: it was got up as if it were a public refreshment-room, only, of course, everything gratis.) 'And he does give wild hops and kicks now and then. However, he compared my "undulating movements" to the French ladies he has danced with in Paris.'

He frowned as I seated myself at a little marble table, and he ordered a footman to bring some champagne cup. 'That was hardly a compliment from Aglen,' he said. 'Why? Because I have reason to know the kind of dancing he means, and do you know, if I were you, I would not dance with him again. He is a young puppy, and if he doesn't take care I shall have to give him a sharp lesson!'

'I don't see how I can dance with any one much if I am to give you all those dances you have marked on my card,' I said, looking sweetly at him, because I didn't want him to get into a temper and spoil my

nice time with him; and I saw it pleased him, for he smiled, and said he was afraid he had been too voracious.

'I am afraid I am a *gourmet* in the pleasures of this life,' he said in a more placable tone. 'And, like most *gourmets*, I can't stand by quietly and see others enjoy the morsels I particularly want to taste.'

'Am I a morsel you want to taste?' I innocently suggested.

He laughed heartily. 'You will give me those dances, or sit out with me, won't you?' he asked, with the dog-pleading look in his eyes.

'I shouldn't if I didn't really want to, I can assure you!' I said, sipping the champagne-cup which was pungent, but cold and delicious. 'But you have left me some, of course. I promised some dances before the ball began.'

He narrowed his eyes somehow, and looked at me between the lids. I did not like it—it reminded me of the snakes I had seen in the Zoo, one of the few places children seem taken to by their pastors and masters.

'So! May I ask who the favoured individual is who has managed to be before me?' His voice sounded sarcastic.

'The Duke,' I answered demurely.

'The Duke indeed! He's nobody!' he scornfully said, tilting his chair. 'You mustn't let the poor old man make a laughing stock of himself—it would seriously annoy the Duchess, and remember, she is giving this dance for you!'

'I am so sorry for him, poor old thing,' I said, telling

him how, on our way to the piggeries, we saw the poultry-yard and he lamented over his likeness to the wounded old cock. But he only mumbled something which had 'sinner' as one of its words, and jumped up. 'Our dance has begun,' he said, and not another word did he speak till we were back in the ball-room—after our next dance.

He is evidently a man of moods, like the men in some of the novels I have managed to get hold of—but dancing with him was—well, is there an English word for it? 'Intoxicating' is such a coarse expression, yet it conveys what my sensations really were as I went round and round with his arm about me—gradually I seemed to lose the consciousness that others were there, that a fashionable crowd of men and women surged about us. I only thought of—*him*.

'Are you sure you are not a hypnotist?' I asked him suddenly, as he drew me away from the gyrating couples and said I ought to have a rest.

He gave me a quick, inquiring glance. 'Why?' he asked.

'Because I seem to be more in a dream than awake,' I honestly said.

'I hope it is a nice dream?' He laughed.

'Oh! That is a poor word!' I said. 'Somehow—I feel I must tell you this—near you I seem to forget disagreeable things and to enjoy life as I never enjoyed it before!'

'That is just as it should be,' he warmly replied. 'There is nothing, dear child, in this whole world that I should like so much as to teach you what a great gift our life here is—and how to enjoy it to the full!'

'Do, then,' I laughed. 'I am sure I want to enjoy life—every one does! Only they don't, or won't. I wonder why?'

'Because they won't learn,' he returned. We were sitting under the gallery which ran round two-thirds of the ball-room—and he leant back in his chair, nursed his knee, and gazed up at the beautiful painted ceiling, where heathen gods and goddesses were riding in chariots and otherwise disporting themselves. 'Do you think, for instance, that your good father does, with his notion of so-called religion so strong that he refused to be here to-night?'

'Well, I don't—know,' I said slowly. 'I have seen him look quite ecstatic when he has been showing those vestments and things he is always buying to Bishops and Fathers and people. But who told you that the Dad's religion prevented him from being here to-night? Did Bellona—I mean the Duchess? No? Surely not *Flo*?'

'Good gracious no! Your sister Flo has no idea I am here to-night! I ought to have been one of her house-party. I had to make some other excuse for keeping away. . . .'

I felt suddenly chilled, I could not tell exactly why—because he had already told me he was Flo's friend as well as Regy's, and it stood to reason that he must be, considering the fact that he motored her down to The Chase like that.

'You—ought to have been—at Flo's house-party?' I slowly asked. 'Surely—you are a bachelor?'

'As far as I know I' He laughed, then becoming suddenly serious, asked me what I meant. When I

explained that I thought as Regy was away abroad Flo would only ask married people, he said that that was true. Most of her present friends staying at Clanricardes (the name of their country house) were married people—only they didn't bring their husbands or wives. 'It is hardly a change for the poor things, you see, if they do! At least, that is how they look at it.'

'I think marriage must be a big mistake,' I said, feeling disappointed, somehow. 'I know Flo thinks so, and really, Regy is rather nice—much better-looking than most of the men here to-night. But how does she come to ask you, then, while she is alone?'

'Oh! I am on guard for the absent Regy,' he lightly answered. 'Your sister's particular pals are even too advanced for old Reg, you see—for a man may have gay chums of his own while he disapproves of them for his wife! I expect I shall get called over the coals on both sides for deserting my flag!' 'Do you belong to both my sister and brother-in-law, may I ask?' was my question. I asked it meaningly. I could not understand.

'You little white-winged angel! . . . I can't tell you more here—come, let us have our valse, and then I will disgorge any revelations you require!'

He was suddenly gay—I might say exultant—and in another minute I was being swung round the great ball-room on his arm. From that moment he was different somehow. A certain proud manner, or reserve, a peculiar stand-offishness, was no longer about him, in his manners. Although I felt more and more at ease with him, I lost that delicious kind of

awe of him. Dance after dance followed. Once I danced with good old Snuffles, who seemed very pleased about something, and when I replied to his question how I liked Colonel Delincourt by 'very much,' he praised my good sense. 'Your sister thinks no end of him,' he said, as if that settled the matter.

'You mean, Flo?' I asked, surprised, for I had soon found out that, as they say in the newspapers, 'relations were strained' between him and Bellona and Flo and Reg.

'I do not mean Lady Wendell,' he returned quite acidly, for him. 'Pray, my dear girl, understand that when I allude to a sister of yours, I mean my dear wife, the Duchess. When she approves of a person, I know that that person is all right.'

'How nice for you! I wish there was some one to sample people for me!' I sighed.

'You cannot do better than follow dear Isabel in all things,' he devoutly said, and indulged in a long-winded panegyric. In his estimation Isabel—my Bellona—was a goddess on earth. I was quite relieved when Colonel Delincourt, who had been hovering about, came up to claim me.

I was certainly considerably confused by the, to me, extraordinary fact that although Regy and Flo, and Snuffles and Bellona, might with justice be called armed neutrals to each other, they agreed in admitting my 'Man in the Wood' to their friendship, all round. I felt I could not allow myself to like him any more, any *harder*, as one might say, until I had seen a lot more of him.

I was wondering how I should, when we were standing

together waiting for the very last dance to begin—early breakfast was to be served in the refreshment-room immediately after—wondering so much why he had not alluded to any next meeting, that I actually asked him where he was going after he left. The motor-car people from long distances had been starting home at intervals since one o'clock.

‘I am going to bed—I hope to dream of you,’ he answered, with a laugh. ‘Didn’t you know I was staying here?’

My heart gave such a jump that I was speechless. And until I formally said ‘good night’ to him I felt ‘checked and worsted,’ somehow, as I have seen it described in books. When I first got to bed—it was daylight, but the lined chintz curtains shut out the glare of sunrise (my room faces east)—I positively could not get to sleep. I was so puzzled. It seems he may be staying here a week, and two or three others as well, especially the old monkeyish Sir Raymond Rollit and his wife, an old-looking lady with a quantity of frizzed white hair that looks like a wig. Yet—it is the London season, and everything will be ‘in full swing,’ I heard Lady Rollit saying, by next Friday. What can it mean? Is some one coming for the ‘little dance’ Bellona gives on that day, for a few other friends from town who could not come to the ball? Some one who is a ‘good *parti*’?

‘Time will prove,’ as they say. Meanwhile, I could not sleep till after the clock struck eight—and I only awoke when the luncheon-bell was ringing.

## V

PEXTON seemed quite in high spirits. It seems the servants had been able to see us from some indoor window overlooking the ball-room, where we could not see them, and they had told her I was 'a lovely dancer.' Somehow, the more cheerful she became, the more depressed I felt. By the time I had sipped some tea, and was going to appear at the luncheon, which was to be served in Bellona's dining-room where we had had that apology for a meal the evening before, I felt glum, grim—a sort of closed portcullis feeling had me in its grip.

I was in a humour I didn't recognise at all. I felt downright disgust for everything—for last night's dance, for the Castle, Bellona, the Duke, the Rollits, and for *him*. Yes, I didn't feel pleased that my 'Man in the Wood' was staying.

They were at luncheon when I went in, and every one except mother and Colonel Delincourt made what they call 'cantering remarks.' I said I was very tired—then they left me alone, and went on with their Society gossip, which I neither knew nor cared anything about. I gathered that some Lady Somebody (they did not mention her name, although the servants had left us to ourselves, but called her Lady S——) had made a scandal by publicly leaving her husband and asking him to divorce her. Bellona and Lady Rollit abused her roundly and soundly. They agreed there

were so many decent ways of ridding oneself of objectionable persons, notably husbands, that for a woman to 'fly in the face of Society like that' was atrocious.

'She will learn decent behaviour too late, when every one cuts her dead,' said Bellona, I should say spitefully, only Bellona looks and speaks too magnificently for her to be accused of anything but lawful severity.

'Ah, poor soul! I cannot imagine anything worse than that,' sighed my mother, shaking her gray head. At home she wears a cap, having closely followed the late Queen Victoria in fashion—but here she only sports a sort of lace butterfly, which waggles when she moves. 'I suppose some wretched man is to blame.

'I do not agree with you, dear Lady Decdote,' cooed Lady Rollit. She has a way of smiling and sticking out her long chin when she speaks which was awfully irritating to me just then. 'I think it is quite too unfair always to blame the man in these cases, especially when he is simply years younger, as in this *gatere*.'

Here Colonel Delincourt began to cough, and had to pour out a glass of water for himself. Somehow after that they said no more of Lady S—and her misdemeanours. It 'made a diversion,' as the stories have it. Then the Duke, who had been fidgeting, asked Bellona what the plans were for the afternoon, and she said that as we were all, naturally, a bit seedy, and some people were coming to dinner, she thought he might drive us in the coach to Maybury, and we could inspect the old church, and have tea at the

Crown Inn, or rather in the old inn garden by the river-side.

The Duke—he looked more the aged Duke, and less like Snuffles to me in my funny humour, somehow—seemed quite pleased at the idea of showing off his favourite team. He had been a personage in the coaching world and did not take kindly to motoring. Every one seemed to approve of the plan for the afternoon—I did not feel as if I particularly cared what I did—and presently we were all standing admiring the exquisite horses harnessed to a coach which looked—*chic*. I felt that was the right word in the right place, and told Snuffles what I thought. He seemed pleased.

He drove, of course, and Lady Rollit and mother and Sir Raymond were in front, while I found myself placed by Colonel Delincourt, behind them. I did not care much one way or the other, but got interested in the beautiful country we passed through, especially as he seemed to know all about it, and was able to tell me what every place was; and lent me his field-glass to look at distant towers and spires.

Maybury was so lovely a village that it really looked as if it had been made on purpose to be admired. Cottages with low white walls covered with roses, clematis, wistaria under their high, heavily thatched roofs. Pretty gardens, with the traditional wells and buckets. Then, farm buildings, poultry-yards—the triangular village green, with its round pond, pollard willows, high old elms in a row, and the village pound. The boys and girls let loose, shouting, from the picturesquely built school at one corner near the church, frightened the Duke's team as they halted at

the Crown Inn. They capered and reared, and the grooms had to cosset and pat and soothe them before leading them off into the stable-yard, followed by the gaping ostlers. I sympathised with the horses. I felt as if any one said much to me I should prance and rear and kick up generally. And why? Because instead of feeling that I was emancipated from school-room trammels—my own master—I was being surrounded and cautiously driven in some direction. Which direction? Why? For what? I felt very bitter. I felt that *he* knew what was going to be done with me, whatever it was. And I suppose I showed it.

The church gate was down a lane leading from the school-house corner of the green. Snuffles stayed behind to make sure his four-footed darlings were all right. Sir Raymond, Lady Rollit, and mother drifted on in front; I did not lag behind, but I felt as if I wanted to be left alone, so I was not close up to them when I heard hurrying feet behind me. Colonel Delincourt came up.

'I am glad I caught you,' he said in low tones. 'I wanted you to tell me, flatly, honestly, what I have done!'

'You have done nothing, as far as I am aware, thanks,' I said. 'Only—well—freedom—grown-up life is disappointing!'

I hurried on, and kept close to them all in the church. After one glance, which showed me he looked dreadfully 'discomfited,' as they say, I did not look at him again. We had tea in what my mother called 'a sylvan spot.' It was a sort of shrubbery beyond the inn garden, with a lawn enclosed by yews overlooking the

river. A table covered with a white cloth had been set for tea by the footmen, who had brought everything but the hot water and milk. I took a basket-chair, and beckoned to Snuffles to take the one next me. But he *was* stupid! He came over and said, 'Anything I can do for you, little lady?' and while he was speaking that tiresome 'Man in the Wood' slipped into the chair.

He certainly tried not to be tiresome. He waited on me hand and foot while tea went on, and hardly spoke at all. We were quite kill-joys, I saw that. But the others did not seem to notice it. Indeed, when tea was over, Bellona turned to him and said, 'You two people should take a stroll along the path by the river, Colonel Delincourt. Show Nell the view from the ruins. She hasn't seen it—of course, we all have, any number of times.'

*Aet N 47*

There was nothing for it but to get up and go. It was a pretty walk. Larches and birches made graceful arches—and between the slim trunks the river shone and sparkled in the afternoon sunshine. He was silent, so was I, until we came to a glade where there was a fallen trunk. Then he suddenly stopped short, took my hand, and made me sit down. He kept my hand between both his, and said, 'Child, you owe it me to tell me the truth. What is it? Why does your freedom disappoint you?'

I had felt positively sulky—and certainly sullen, as Miss Grimston used to call it when I would not learn my French grammar. But when my hand touched his I seemed to thaw. It was just like thawing or melting. A lump came in my throat, my eyes smarted.

‘Because it does,’ I said, with a laugh which was half a sob. ‘I feel as the poor beasts must do, in the wilds, when they are being driven into pens. I am certain Bellona and mother are driving me into some pen or another !’

‘Ah !’ He held my hand tighter. ‘What a wonderfully sensitive darling you are ! You have guessed that you are being trotted out—or are going to be when Lord Danebury arrives !’

‘Lord Danebury?’ I asked incredulously.

‘The father of the two little girls who stayed with us at Easter?’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘He is a widower, and I believe your father has set his heart on your being Lady Danebury the second, because he is High Church, and I almost believe goes one better than Sir Eustace in church millinery and decoration.’

‘Oh ! My father would never do anything so horrible as to marry me to an old widower with daughters nearly as old as I am !’ I cried, hardly believing my own ears.

‘He is not to be blamed, poor man ! He considers that marrying you to a man with religious fads is keeping you “unspotted from the world !” The last Lady Danebury died of it, they say—and I can well believe it.’

‘He cannot drag me to the altar,’ I said viciously. ‘If you are right—I shall jib, like an obstinate horse. I shall not go home ! I shall stay here. I am sure the Duke and Bellona will keep me !’

‘You might do that, certainly—but it would cause friction—strife. No ! There is a better way out of it than that.’

He spoke meaningfully. I felt a little jump in my chest. But I summoned courage to look at him. Then I knew.

He did look really handsome, with that enticing look in his eyes. It fascinated me—his eyes seemed to magnetise mine.

'Marry me,' he said in a hoarse whisper, 'darling, I will teach you what Love means! I will begin at the beginning, and there is not a joy, pleasure, delight in marriage—real marriage—which you shall not learn! Be my beloved, my own, my pupil in the mysteries of joy—of life. One creature cannot be happy alone—but the ecstasies which man and woman, paired, can enjoy—well, that, and that only, is life!'

It sounded like a litany—the litany of the religion of Love. His voice seemed to make my veins tingle—I felt as if he was drawing me nearer and nearer. I did struggle for a moment, well, nearly a minute, I do think—then he simply took me in his arms and kissed my lips.

It was the sweetest, gentlest, if longest kiss I could have imagined in my most delicious dreams. . . . So exquisite was the happiness I felt that it was a positive pain when it was over.

'You—love me?' I almost imploringly asked.  
'Really, truly?'

'Should I want you for my own—for always—if I did not—you extraordinary little sceptic?' he asked smilingly. I felt overwhelmed. I was trembling—I felt so weak that I was clinging to him for support. But he was as calm, as unruffled, as—well, I don't know what to compare him to. 'Come—you must answer me a question. You agree to marry me?'

'If—if, they will let me,' I said. At that moment I did not feel warlike, or capable of fighting anything or anybody.

'Oh, they will let you, safe enough! The Duchess can carry everything before her when she chooses. It was sharp of you to nickname her "Bellona"! When she intends a thing she brooks no opposition from God, man, or devil!'

'But—will she choose? What about this dreadful Lord Danebury?' I asked weakly. I still clutched his arm, at the risk of his thinking me a coward.

'Oh, that is all right!' he answered, with a laugh. 'The Duchess and I understand each other. I am her man in this affair of your being *rangé*. She so disliked your father's ideas of your future that I believe she asked me here, hoping you and I would settle matters before his Lordship had a look in. Nell, dear, we must leave this spot engaged to each other or there will be squalls. As soon as we get back to the Castle I must ask to see the Duke and the Duchess alone, and tell them.'

'But—mother?' I suggested.

'Oh! Your Bellona will dispose of her, and your father too—you have only to say "yes" to me, darling, here, now, and that you will be my wife is assured.'

He stood up, and drew me up after him. I felt dreadfully shaky. It was a mere murmur, my 'yes.' But he kissed me—my forehead, my cheeks, my lips, and called me sweet, endearing names. . . . As I gradually became accustomed to the feeling of being his, part of him, I felt stronger.

Still, on the way back, I asked him whether he knew I had no dowry, or only a small one.

'My darling child—men marry women, not women's money,' he answered. 'At least, when the women are sweet, pure, pretty creatures like you! I have enough money for you, or any number of "yous"! How? Two years ago an old man died who was called 'Miser Hindlip. He deserved the name—he had done nothing but save and scrape all his life. But he was my maternal grandfather, and left me everything. All the land hereabouts belongs to me. I expect the Duchess had an eye to that fact when she arranged this drive. Come now, don't look like a frightened hare. We have to face them all, and I don't want you to look as if you had done something dreadful, and were expiring with shame!'

I tried to look brazen, and to hold my head as high as Bellona's as we left the shrubbery and came to the lawn where we had had tea—but I need not have bothered. They were all gone! The wooden table was bare—birds who were hopping about the grass picking up the crumbs flew off as they saw us.

One of the cream-chocolate ducal servitors met us in the inn garden. We had to hurry to prevent those horses from capering and rearing. They were all in their seats but us—Lady Rollit had felt a draught—she and mother travelled inside. The box-seat was left for us two—for Bellona elected to sit behind us with Sir Raymond. I was glad—for I felt as if I could not have born more love-making just then—and I wanted to think over what I had done. . . .

## VI

SKYE CASTLE, May —th.—There is no doubt about it! When one has let a man kiss one like that, he has *got* one. One *belongs* to him in some way one cannot understand.

I am quite accustomed to the fact that in a few weeks at the soonest, months at the latest, I shall be Colonel Delincourt's wife. I thought the position of being engaged to him all in a minute like that would be horrid. But Bellona really behaved splendidly. Henry (he wanted to me call him Harry, but it really would be too silly, he is too old) managed to take me to them as soon as we returned to Maybury. He kept my hand on his arm and took me straight in and introduced me as his 'little wife to be.'

Bellona did not jump, as I expected. She kissed me and congratulated us both, and Snuffles chuckled, wagged his head, rubbed his hands, and said something about 'getting the better of the old boy at home,' at which Bellona gave him such a withering look that he wriggled and muttered something apologetic which we none of us listened to. For, as luck would have it, mother came in—she had been looking for me, and Bellona turned to her and said, 'You will be pleased to hear that Colonel Delincourt has proposed for Nell, and we have accepted him.'

(This in a regal kind of way. Her manner of saying 'we' was really so convincing that for a minute I

should have found it difficult to answer if any one had said, 'I suppose your sister is Queen of something, somewhere?')

My mother looked 'flabbergasted,' as Regy calls it. Her jaw fell—yes—literally it did—and she opened her eyes wide and went an ugly ochre sort of colour.

'Oh—dear—me—what shall I say to my husband? He had quite other views for Nell,' she stammered. 'Who will tell him? I daren't.'

'My dear mother, no one asks you to,' said Bellona coolly—yes, and contemptuously, but then she does expect such a lot from people, she generally is contemptuous. 'I will speak—or rather write—to father.'

'Ought I not to see Sir Eustace? I can easily run over to-night or to-morrow,' suggested Henry, but mother gave a start and a funny little gasp. 'Not for worlds, Colonel Delincourt, not for worlds,' she wailed, spreading out her hands in an odd sort of way which made me remember she came from people in trade, who have odd ways. 'You see, it is not only that you are not of his faith, but you are Regy's friend—and he so disapproves of Regy.'

'Then he has no right to, mother,' said Bellona, seating herself and looking a mixture of Boadicea and Maria Theresa of Austria. 'He consented to Flo's marriage with Lord Wendell, and it is unutterably mean for him to turn upon him now, when he well knew what he was all along! And as for my father having "views" for any one or anything, his religious delusions quite incapacitate him from being capable of judging for any one, or, indeed, in any matter whatsoever!'

'My dear Isabel, you really go to far,' began my mother—but Snuffles came to the rescue.

'Come, come, we are not going to make troubles where there are none,' he said, with a laugh. 'I think with you, mother-in-law, the pater has a right to his own opinions. Still, in spite of his possible intercourse with saints and angels—I wouldn't undertake to deny that he has—saints and angels are extraordinary creatures, and may be interested in people who admire them so much—the pater, I repeat, is within his rights in having ideas in regards to Nell's marriage. Meanwhile, it is wronging him to suppose that when this affair is put before him in the right light he won't see it as we do. I think, myself, I ought to take the bull by the horns and go to him before you return.'

Bellona almost sneered—mother expostulated—and it was such a regular Babel that I ran off and shut myself in my room. When I came down to dinner they were all in the most heavenly tempers. It had been settled, Henry told me, 'aside' that both he and Snuffles would take the Dad by surprise the day after the dance. 'No fear that we shall fail,' he said.

*May —th.*—Henry makes love exquisitely. We spent the whole afternoon in the picture-gallery—I can't accustom myself to being embraced out of doors. His kisses seem to make me like people who are drunk—nicely—drunk—or mesmerised, or stupefied with sulphonal or chloral, or any of those things which they give you when you are pretty well mad with toothache. To lie in his arms and be kissed so gently but with such a kind of suppressed frenzy is the most delightful thing in the world. I had no idea there was

anything like it anywhere, and I told him so, adding, 'Will you kiss me like this after we are married?'

He gave quite a start, then roared with laughter. 'Good heavens! What an idea! Whatever made you doubt that I would?' he asked, as if it were a great joke.

'It is the most natural conclusion to come to,' I said severely, for his burst of laughter hurt me, somehow. 'You are Regy's friend—chum—pal, or whatever you please to call it, and I heard Flo tell Miss Grimston, our governess, that no sooner was she married than Regy dropped the lover and became the husband. . . . When was that? When Miss Grimston was asking her why she and Regy had taken to visiting apart—why they did not go out together like husbands and wives should. I remember very well what she ended by saying—"Husbands are disgusting!"'

'One may be "pals" with a fellow, and yet not be at all like him in one's ways of going on,' he tenderly said, putting his arm round me in that fascinating way which is so well described by the pretty word 'caress,' and which always gives me a tiny electric shock. 'I promise you, darling, I will not be a "disgusting husband." You like me to kiss you, you say. Well, that is only the letter A of the alphabet of Love. I am going to teach it you—after we are married—right up to Z!'

Then he took me off to the garden—put me in a hammock, and read some wonderful verses of Shelley and Swinburne to me, and I fell more and more in love with him, longing for the dance when I should be close to him straight off for another whole evening. He says

I must dance with 'father's claimant' three or four times, because he and Snuffles are sure to be cross-examined by the Dad as to how I liked Lord Danebury *after giving proper chances to make me like him.* Never mind ! Four dances out of fifteen leave eleven for him. Lucky Nell ! I could not do without him now. If he is really going to remain the same after we are married, and not change into one of the 'disgusting husbands' Flo talks about.

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*May —th (two days later).*—I cannot help laughing when I think of Lord D.'s visit, it was so irresistibly comical. He was to arrive to tea. I had been upstairs in my room, changing from my habit after a long ride over Henry's property in this neighbourhood with him, and when I went down I found them in the old hall, at tea.

Bellona was presiding, as usual, in her stately way. On one side of her sat mother, on the other Lady Rollit. Near the hearth, teacups in hand, Snuffles, Henry, and Sir Raymond Rollit stood about an awfully tall, thin man, with a big nose, a long upper lip, and an equally long chin. He wore a monocle, which dropped from his eye as I came in, when, after a stare, he met me half-way across the hall, having set down his teacup —goodness knows where.

'Miss Perpetua, I believe,' he began, holding my hand and pumping it up and down. 'I am really grieved not to meet your good father. I quite hoped he would be here. Not that he led me to understand he would be; oh dear no ! He knows I am well aware of his entire distaste for frivolous entertainments.

Still, somehow, I had thought he might make a perfectly excusable exception for your coming-of-age festivities !' He spoke in a sonorous voice, with that patronising air which I so abhor. The Dad's favourite clergyman has it, but not my Bishop ! (I should describe *him* as 'the convivial pastor of souls.')

'He might have done so, perhaps, but I happen not to be coming of age, Lord Danebury,' I said. 'I am not presented yet. A week ago I was only a school-girl.'

'Dear—me ! You astonish me, do you know?' he said, so slowly that one felt as if his words hardly belonged to one another. 'I quite thought—but no matter ! I am just as much delighted to make your acquaintance !'

He went back to his tea, staring funnily at me every now and then in a way which made me feel a downright fraud. At dinner I sat next him—Henry was two persons off, lower down the table. His talk was all of the Dad's wonderful church arrangements. He said the Dad was his great example, his first act in married life being to restore the private chapel—formerly the friars' refectory. 'Such self-abnegation !' he exclaimed, looking up at the ceiling, and masticating more rampageously than ever. 'It must have cost a small fortune ! I envied him ! My income would not admit of such privileges !'

'You did not marry a rich woman, then?' I asked innocently. 'It was mother's money which did that trick ! Her people were all in trade—had not an ancestor among the lot !'

I thought he was going to choke. But he drank

some iced water. (He is a teetotaller—a 'nasty product of a degenerate age' Flo calls them. I should hate marrying one, and having no cellar when one gave dinner-parties.)

'My dear young lady—what is a wife's is a husband's, what is a husband's is a wife's, after they have left God's altar man and wife, with the Church's blessing upon them,' he unctuously said, when he had conquered the fishbone. (We were still in the fish stage—'Act the second of the prandial Play.' Flo.)

'Then I differ from you,' I said, imitating the Dad this time, speaking slowly, and clearing my throat every two or three words. 'True—the man 'endows his wife with all his worldly goods' the marriage service has it—but there is nothing about the wife endowing the husband. Parliament saw that when it passed the Married Woman's Property Act.'

'You are quite an advanced thinker, I see, Miss Perpetua.'

(If he didn't drink, he made it up in eating. As he said that, he helped himself to two cutlets, and quite a quarter of the entrée-dish of young peas—the greedy pig, and I wanted a good helping. Bellona's chef invented a pea-sifting machine and nothing but the baby peas appear at this table.)

'I don't know whether it is advanced to criticise one's parents,' I said, 'but we girls have thought mother a nincompoop for giving every farthing up to the Dad and leaving us without proper dowries, especially as we don't care about the Rubric and the chapel and vestments and banners and particularly those daily matins which make the servants give

warning unless their wages are nearly doubled, and even then they prefer taking a livelier place with less wages, where the liberty of the subject isn't interfered with.'

I had watched him while I mentioned dowries, and I fancied he looked glum. I spoke to Sir Raymond Rollit on my left; he was saying he never ate peas like Bellona's, and I told him about the chef's invention. When I turned back his Lordship had nearly finished everything but the cutlet-bones, and turned to me with, what I should call, if I were very truthful, a saintly grin.

'Do you know you are a most diverting young lady?' he said. 'I should say, now, that no one living with you could by any possibility have a dull moment!'

'Oh, couldn't they?' I derisively remarked, opening my eyes wide to emphasise what I said. 'At home I am always sighing and groaning like the birds are supposed to have done when Cock Robin died! Why? do you ask. Because I dare say religion is all very well in its place, and I have no objection going to church once on Sundays, in the country, where people notice things—not in town, mind you—but religion which spends the money of the women of the family on banners and vestments and extra services nobody wants is, in my mind, no religion at all. I think the gospel tells us that true religion is to be kind to widows and orphans, as well as to keep oneself unspotted from the world!'

'True, perfectly true,' he returned, with one eye on his fresh plate—slices of saddle of mutton. (With intervals of silence, we had already arrived at Act IV.

—the roast.) ‘But I am absolutely certain, my dear Miss Perpetua, that your most excellent father helps many a widow and many an orphan without shouting it from the housetops!’ He spoke chidingly.

‘If he does, all I can say is, it is a shame!’ I hotly said. ‘Charity begins at home—and he has never considered his own widow and orphans—for that is what we should be, if he died!’

He began to look scared, and stammered out that he was certain his good friend would make ample provision for his family—he spoke in a mumbling sort of way, getting an ugly red, and looking rather anxiously across the table at mother, who was smiling blandly—he did not know she was hard of hearing, especially when every one talked at the top of his or her voice, as they had begun to do after several different brands of wine had been poured in their glasses, whether they liked it or not (Snuffles’ orders). ‘And pray, dear child, for you are but a child, what would you do with a fortune if you could dispose of it as the fancy took you? He spoke—I felt—satirically.

‘Let—me—see,’ I began slowly, as if pondering on the subject. ‘First, I should have a racing stud. I love horses. Our second groom should be one of my jockeys. He is a great chum of mine, tells me all the tit-bits of scandal along the country-side—he was brought up on half rations to qualify for a jockey, you know! Then, for personal amusement, I should give fantastic entertainments like the Americans do. I could invent a lot of new ways of dining, I think—and I should give sums of money to theatre-managers to give masked balls free to every one who came in a

suitable costume, without asking either their name or their address.'

'I fear your schoolroom life has included the reading of fairy-tales,' he said indulgently, as strangers who are not interested speak to horribly naughty children. They are shocked, but they don't care—the bad child is not *their* child.

'I don't care for fairy-tales—never did, I could always make up better stories for myself,' I went on, telling myself 'in for a penny, in for a pound.' 'We had a very strict governess. She superintended our recreations, so they were so utterly stupid that, as far as I am concerned, my only amusement was planning what I should do when I was free. I think the best thing I can do is to get married to some young man who likes the sort of things I like. Don't you? A man something like my brother-in-law Regy, Lord Wendell, you know. Have you ever met him? He is no end of good fun!'

He hesitated for quite a minute, and went on champing his mutton and jelly and potato-chips as if his salvation depended upon his getting through in time to partake of whatever came next. When he had laid his knife and fork neatly together on his cleaned plate, he turned to me.

'I have met Lord Wendell,' he grimly said. 'But I must say that he is hardly the kind of man to undertake the worldly instruction of an innocent schoolgirl.'

How dared he call me—a betrothed wife, soon to be married—a 'schoolgirl'? Of course, he did not know of my engagement. But I resented it all the same—

I should have, a week ago. I hate that adage 'give a dog a bad name and hang him.' Because I am a school-girl, or rather I might say, because I was recently freed from schoolroom imprisonment, there can surely be no need to label me—placard me, as if it were a branding I could never hide from my fellow-creatures, do or say what I might. But I said nothing. I left him master of the field, and any further conversation between us was about the 'exquisite gardens,' as he termed them—a suitable theme for dessert.

Then Bellona rose, and we females trooped after her to the ball-room, for this dance was a 'Cinderella.' We had dined ever so much earlier than usual on purpose, and we had hardly reached the ball-room before there was an influx of neighbours—clergy and their grown-up offspring, small squires and their daughters escorted by their mammas, dowdy-looking persons—then a few officers from the nearest garrison town, and the London contingent of Bellona's intimates who motored down to please her, bargaining for a 'small and early' dance that they might get back in town at a less preposterous hour than her London guests had succeeded in doing on the last occasion.

I felt in rising spirits. My dinner experiences had comforted me—they had not only shown me that when I was at bay I could fight with suitable weapons, but I shrewdly suspected I had choked off 'the Dad's man' for good and all!

'You look triumphant,' said Henry, coming across to me between the groups of people assembling for the first waltz. (Excepting the few from town, they were a depressing, gloomy lot—they were staring about as

if they were waiting to be executed, and seemed afraid to speak to each other.) 'My beloved darling, did that man bore you to distraction, and how did you manage to get the better of him—for that you did, any one could see with half an eye?'

I was in a teasing humour, so I teased him a bit, promising to tell him, after we were married, what sort of an abandoned hussy I made Lord Danebury believe I was. 'You reserve things till then, so why shouldn't I?' I added.

He only laughed—and took me to the dancers. We had a delicious valse—marred, to me, by the unwelcome sight of Lord Danebury, looking uglier than ever, and as cross as two sticks, in close converse with mother on a sofa near the door.

What *could* be the matter with them both?

He sat humped up, hugging his black cloth knee and showing half a foot of thin ankle and leg and black silk sock, and literally holding forth to mother, his elbow propped up by his knee; and his long, bony fingers feeling the bumps on his high head. (I should not wonder if he believed in phrenology.) While he preached and exhorted, mother grew redder and her double-chin puffed out, her nose swelled as it does when some one has annoyed her, a dressmaker hasn't sent in time, or a servant has given warning as they are always doing unless they needn't attend chapel—and that the Dad won't hear of. Presently he got up, looked round the room, standing with his arms a-kimbo, as I have seen one or two of father's pet clergymen do at school-treats. Was he looking for me? I was sitting under the gallery with Henry—a dance

was just over—I felt as if some one had dropped cold water down my spine.

‘I am undone!’ I groaned. ‘Mine enemy bears down upon me—rescue me, or I perish!’

I flung open my fan and, hiding behind it, watched him through the sticks. To my intense delight he loitered a moment or two near the door—and was gone!

‘He has gone—and for good—I have frightened him away!’ I said, overjoyed.

‘Ah,’ said Henry, shaking his head. ‘Not much fear of that, when he has the chance of dancing with you! I rather look forward to that, darling! To watch your face when he is plunging about—that build of man never can even walk through a square dance properly—will be as good as a funny turn in a music-hall!’

However, he did not return. I enjoyed any number of dances with Henry, and between them we sat in the conservatory and he kissed me. However, my spirits evaporated utterly when mother said good-night to me quite severely. I guessed that old raven had been making mischief. It seems that he was telephoned for (arranged beforehand, of course) and that he said he was summoned to London on urgent private affairs, and left by the midnight express, which stops for something or another at the nearest town. But before he went he told mother all that I said at dinner, with embellishments. I have never seen her quite so awfully shocked. Her poor face quivered like a jelly, and she pounded her pocket-handkerchief into a ball as I dare say her mother and grandmother did

before her (alas, Heredity ! What sins are committed in thy name !). At last, I could not help it, I laughed.

'Perpetua !' she exclaimed. She used to call me that when I had sinned beyond ordinary forgiveness, and had to pray at my father's knees in the chapel, and have a sermon on my iniquities which I know was nuts to him—it made him imagine himself a 'celibate priest' for half an hour. 'Perpetua ! What will your father say ? His Lordship intends to see him to recommend proceedings for your future guidance.'

If I had been a man, I should have sworn, and felt better. Being only a girl, I said he was a wretched sneak—and felt worse.

'I don't care,' I said. 'He is a "softy" like Ben Wallis in the village. He must be, if he did not see I was "chaffing" like every one decent "chaffs" when they don't want to say right out "I have no mind for you," but to hint it in a way that will not hurt people's vanity so much. I think I did the right thing !'

'I think you are a silly child, and it is high time that you had some one in authority to save you from yourself,' said she emphatically. 'I am afraid, now, that your father will never give his consent to your marriage with Colonel Delincourt, for Lord Danebury intends to see him early to-morrow morning—he will motor down to be in time for Matins—to urge him to take his advice as to your immediate future. You shocked him so terribly, my poor child, that he thinks unless you have a strict training for a time you will come utterly to grief. So he will advise your father to send you on a visit to his sister for a while. She is the Abbess, or Lady Superior, of an Anglican convent—and he thinks

that the mere atmosphere of the place will do wonders for you.'

'Fortunately for me, I belong to some one else now,' I said—and after ascertaining that mother had not had the pluck to quash the man's impudent interference by telling him of my engagement, I said good-night, and rushed back to my room. I had made up my mind, as soon as mother let out what that interfering old parrot was up to, what *I* should do. I had heard 'Archie' ask Henry to have a smoke with him to 'talk over to-morrow's campaign,' as he called it, after every one had gone. The dance being, most fortunately, 'small and early,' they would be just—in blissful ignorance of that wretched creature's spite—talking over some leisurely proceeding! I must beard them in their den, and startle them. I thought I could do it. I, as I said, rushed back to my room. I had sent Pexton to bed. I had a good look at myself in my long glass—and thought I should *do* to burst upon them with an appeal for protection. I am sometimes red when I am angry, but *rage*—and I was in a towering rage—makes me look like a dying creature. I saw big shining eyes in a dead-white face—a miserable, piteous mouth—dark circles round my eyes (they had come from being bothered and badgered) and a fluffy transparency about my hair—Pexton makes a big plait of it which was wagging as I moved down the Watteau back of an exceedingly pretty tea-gown—gray and silver stuff over white silk.

'I look a typical Ophelia,' I told myself. Then, shutting my door as softly as possible, I crept out—down the great staircase, which remains dimly lighted

by a few electric lamps through the night—and along a corridor—this was still brilliantly lighted—it led to Snuffles' den, where he smokes and tippling unknown to Bellona. As I neared the door I heard Henry's voice—then good old Snuffles laughed. I could tell they were satisfied with themselves to a prodigious extent—and felt sure they were *tête-à-tête*. But I waited a minute or two before I tapped at the door.

'Come in,' said Snuffles. He attached little importance to the summons, evidently—thought it was his valet, I expect. When I opened the door and rushed into the room—then, standing still, stared as one demented, first at one, then at the other—they sprang up.

'Good God! What is it?' cried Henry. He looked suddenly old and pinched—an Ancient Mariner—and as for poor old Snuffles, he looked, as he stood there gazing and mumbling—his way when excited—as if he was his own ghost after burial for many long years.

Henry put his arm round me, and placed me in a chair—upon which I sank back, closed my eyes, and groaned. I was not fainting—far from it—I was by far too angry with that contemptible viper Lord Danebury to faint. But I let them think I was. They were very much put about—particularly Snuffles—Henry seems equal to any emergency; they got soda-water and some nice kind of spirit, and held it to my lips; they fanned me with the *Times*—Henry whispered 'darlings' and 'dearests' into my ears. It was only when Snuffles, in a trembling voice, suggested fetching Bellona that I thought it best to 'come to.'

I smiled a dying sort of smile—and held out my right hand to Henry, my left to Snuffles. I felt greatly flattered by the consternation expressed in their faces—by the anxious, tender way in which they fondled my hands (if anything, Snuffles patted and kissed and stroked more lovingly than Henry). Then, as there was no time to be lost, I told them of the diabolical revenge of the interfering parrot. Then they became practical, Henry especially.

He stood up and involuntarily buttoned his smoking-jacket, staring at nothing in particular. That told me he meant business. And he did. He proposed a night journey of himself and Snuffles to catch the Dad and to tell their tale before that wretched creature had had time to get to my father and to tell *his* story.

For a minute almost Snuffles looked bewildered. 'Bellona won't hear of it,' he stammered.

'Not till we return, certainly,' said Henry decidedly—and was so quick in making up his mind that they must order one of the most rapid automobiles and start at once, that Snuffles gave way, faintly expostulating now and then. I waited to keep him up to the mark while Henry ran upstairs and changed—then left him with his valet and went back to my room.

Henry had embraced me, whispering '*au revoir* till I return, with everything settled.' I peeped through my window and watched. In a quarter of an hour a swift, silent motor-brougham rushed along the road through the park, and I felt gratified to think what a real, earnest lover I have got!

## VII

DEDCOTE PRIORY, *May—th.*—A fortnight since we left Skye Castle—and Thursday is my wedding-day!

I haven't made any entries since recording Henry and Snuffles' night journey to interview the Dad before that silly Lord Danebury could by any means get at him and poison his mind against me—because the worry has been really frightful. I see a lot of lines in my face when I look at myself in the glass—I am sure I look at least ten years older—as for feeling older, I feel a hundred. I really don't care whether I am married or not, now. I am so sick and tired of the fuss, and I feel as if there was some secret, as if something was being hidden from me, but I can't for the life of me 'put my finger on the spot.'

I feel it, because those connected with my marriage with Henry don't seem pleased with the idea, or with anything, and I have once or twice come upon one or two of them talking in low voices in corners, after which they sulk with each other. I can't help having eyes, can I? I believe they take me for an absolute donkey, but my love for Henry has taught me a lot! It seems to have woke me up. (I expect that was what the story of the Sleeping Beauty meant. A girl is asleep as regards real life until the right man comes, and she falls in love with him, and awakens.) I hemmed and ha'ed loudly wherever I went in the house, or sang like the nursemaid used to when she was cleaning the

nurseries, but their discussions absorbed them so much that they seldom heard me coming. I heard snatches of their talk, and one in particular haunted me afterwards.

Lady Rollit (her twins of thirteen are my only bridesmaids, and are here to-day, playing hide-and-seek in the upper stories with some children of Squire Forsham's) was sitting with Bellona in that very curtained recess where I once overheard the Dad and mother discussing me. She evidently did not know the disadvantages of the spot for confidences, for both she and Lady Rollit spoke in ordinary tones. I heard Lady Rollit, first.

'I cannot help being really sorry for her, do you know,' she said. 'I am neither strait-laced nor censorious. These days do not admit of our passing judgments upon those unhappy persons—*femmes incomprises*. We know pretty well what *he* is as a husband. And the other one has, they say, been all in all to her, most devoted, most generous. I expect she will take it badly.'

'If she does, it will serve her right,' said Bellona viciously. 'Marriage is a lottery. We take the tickets with our eyes open, and if we draw a blank, we must accept our fate. I have no sympathy whatever with a married woman who has a lover—'

Here I recognised I was eavesdropping, and fled. I should not have taken any notice of what I had happened to overhear, because Lady Rollit was always mildly discussing scandals when she was left with Bellona, and they thought me out of earshot, had not those few words haunted me persistently. I could not help wondering who the poor woman with a bad husband

who had a lover who was 'devoted, most generous,' was: because, although I am not a married woman with a bad husband, my Henry is both those things. He has given me the loveliest jewels. He found out I liked lace, so he actually went to Brussels and brought back the most exquisite veil and flounces—Pexton speaks of him with bated breath. She, I do believe, classes him with the angels in heaven. (She is High Church, of course.)

But I have wandered. I must 'return to my muttons.' (They used to be lambs, I feel now, but have grown into sheep—sheep which butt now and then.) I left off where Henry and good old Snuffles started in the middle of the night. It was really grand of them. Snuffles left a letter for Bellona, who forbids any one disturbing her after she has dismissed her maid, and locked her door—a letter which evidently satisfied her for 'taking the law into his own hands,' as she expressed it to mother and me when graciously talking over 'the situation,' as she called it, over our late breakfast. 'Archie has a certain amount of diplomacy, naturally, and I have taken him in hand since our marriage, so that I feel quite sure that he will convince my father that this marriage is most desirable for Elinor,' she said, as she poured out her second cup of tea. (The servants had departed.) 'Then, Henry is so genuinely attached to Elinor, that I am sure "Love will find out the way" of adding his entreaties to Archie's.'

'You do really believe that Colonel Delincourt is deeply in love with Nell, then?' asked my mother suddenly.

Bellona raised her arched eyebrows, and rolled her eyes contemptuously from my mother to myself. (I wondered at her—no matter how odd mother might be, I could not look at her scornfully like that.) 'Elinor is my own sister,' she stiffly said. 'I am absolutely certain that nothing but a conviction that mutual affection exists between her and Henry Delincourt would have induced her to accept him. I am right, Elinor?'

'I really don't see what business it is of any one's whether Henry and I love each other,' I bluntly replied—upon which she abruptly changed the conversation, which was, a few minutes later, further disposed of by a diversion. The butler appeared with a telegram on a salver. It was from Snuffles: 'Arrived safely. Everything all right. We return at once.'

Bellona became less warlike. I spent the day, mostly in the grounds, playing with the Rollit children, and keeping out of the way of 'the grown-ups.' But waiting was dreary work. We had tea out of doors, and I and the twins and their mother played croquet until the first dressing-bell rang. (Sir Raymond had been on a motoring excursion.) I escaped at once, I was 'on tenterhooks,' as they called it. While Pexton was dressing me, I heard the, to me delicious, sound of a motor. The hoots came nearer. In a few minutes there was a tap at the door—Henry's valet with a scribbled note.

'Everything is all right, darling, particulars after dinner,' was the message.

I hurried down, but only Sir Raymond and his wife were in the drawing-room, he pacing the floor (poor

man, I believe he is half dead of dullness) and she in her prim black evening frock, knitting away for dear life at a fleecy Shetland shawl. Talk over this piece of work kept us until the door was flung open and Henry appeared.

He gave me a long, impassioned look, then quietly seated himself and chatted to Lady Rollit about her work. Then we slipped away into the conservatory—where, after smothering me with kisses, he told me the Dad had consented.

I shook my head. 'Except in the High Church business, he never knows his own mind for five minutes together! If he has given in to-day, he will wriggle out of it to-morrow. I have heard him do it with mother over and over again,' I said disconsolately.

But Henry only laughed. It seems he managed the Dad most beautifully by assaulting him with his very own weapons. He began by talking of all he had heard of the exemplary manner in which we had been educated —what true Catholics we were—and that talking to me had quite converted him to the Dad's way of thinking. 'Your dear daughter Perpetua does not wear her heart on her sleeve,' he had said. (Oh!!!) 'But her attachment to the Catholic Church is deep and true.' Then he added that he had made a vow to build a chapel at Maybury Towers, where we shall generally reside to be near Snuffles and Bellona, and closely to imitate all the Dad's arrangements at Dedeote, should he be blest with me for a wife—

'Oh! How awful! You know you never did!' I interupted. 'I don't like that sneaky way of getting things. It is like a general ordering his forces to tunnel

under a city and blow it up instead of laying siege openly! Think of the stories I shall have to tell!

'Not any more than you told me at our first meeting,' he audaciously said. 'Women were storytellers from the very beginning, and will be storytellers to the end—and if they were alone on a desert island and had no one to tell tarradiddles to, they would lie to themselves!'

'You have a nice opinion of my sex, I must say!' I cried. 'Is it founded on my sister Flo?'

For an instant he looked as if I had struck him. Then he became suddenly serious.

'I will not tease you any more, we must really treat a serious subject—our future together—seriously,' he said in an utterly different manner. 'I really meant what I said, love, to a certain extent. If you would like me to build a chapel, I will. I will even pay for a second curate to hold a daily service. Anything—but losing you—I am ready to bear. And you really mustn't quarrel with the means I took to bring Sir Eustace to our way of thinking—for the way is smooth for us—we have only to walk up to the altar together and get married!'

It seems that my mendacious lover had so captured my father's sympathies that, after he had told him the amount of his yearly income, his capital, his landed property, and the rest of it, the Dad seemed most interested and pleased—and it was settled that the wedding was to be as soon as possible.

'But—he has still to interview the interfering parrot!' I said.

'That is all settled,' he replied. 'Your father

demurred a little at one point. He said he could not really give his consent until he had "conferred" with his esteemed friend, Lord Danebury, who had had full permission from him to court you. "Indeed, you may have met him at Skye Castle," he said, looking from me to the Duke.

'Then I told him that he *had* been there, but had taken a dislike to you. "Her youthful gaiety seemed flippancy and frivolity to him," I said. "And he informed Lady Dedeote, much to her annoyance, that Perpetua ought to be sent to some convent reformatory before she would be fit to be considered grown-up, and that he should call upon you to give his advice in the matter."

'He was difficult to convince that such a thing could possibly have happened. He stiffened and bridled and in a tone of offended dignity informed us both that he had never submitted to any interference in regard to his children, and that he was hardly likely to brook it now. "That Perpetua has converted you into being so good a Churchman is proof positive of the fact that her training has been absolutely successful," he said, with intense pride. (You *will* have a royal welcome from him, old girl !) "I am deeply indebted to you, Colonel Delincourt, for this hint of the state of affairs, and you may rest assured that I shall not give my misguided friend the opportunity of offering me an indignity which might cause a breach between us that even time itself could hardly bridge over.'

"The good old boy can't help talking like that, he spends his time in writing sermons, and presenting them to poor curates who write begging letters to him,

with a five pun' note or even more," said the Duke to me when we were washing our hands before breakfast. Sir Eustace ordered up everything in the larder, I do believe! I know the table and sideboard groaned. He wanted us to stay on, but we had agreed only to wait to see the play out—and then to fly back here. What play? You delightful simpleton! Lord Danebury's visit, of course! We had just finished breakfast when I heard the motor-car, and presently he was announced. He had been taken into the library.

"Your father stalked out. I looked at the Duke, and the Duke at me.

"You have settled *his* hash!" he said.

"I am glad you think so," I said. I myself was not so sure. However, we timed the interview—and in seven minutes and a half from the moment your father left us we heard a door bang, then another, then the hall-door was shut in an uncompromising manner—then your father reappeared.

"You see, I disposed of Lord Danebury in a summary fashion," he said—evidently tremendously riled. "You were quite right, Colonel Delincourt. My poor friend was sufficiently mistaken and ill-advised to begin an interference with my plans for my youngest daughter. I said to him exactly what I have said to you. The proof that my system of education is the right one is that I am proud of my daughter Perpetua, and expect, in the immediate future, to be prouder still. I think I sent him away, if a disappointed and saddened, yet a wiser man."

"Then he quite beamed upon me, allowed me to ask him anything, said "yes," unconditionally, to almost

everything I proposed, and when we got away—no easy task, he seemed so pleased with us, and wanted to give me his ideas for the building of that blessed votive chapel I gassed about—he gave me his paternal blessing, as his “future son.””

‘But——’ I hesitated. Still I was incredulous. ‘Did he know of your friendship with Regy—and Flo?’ I asked.

‘Really——’ He looked more angry with me than he ever has yet. ‘Do you know, darling, that you are really rather irritating sometimes?’ he said. ‘What can my acquaintance with Regy and his wife have to do with my marriage with you? Nothing!’

‘I don’t think he *can* know—for he utterly disapproves of their ways of going-on,’ I said, giving him a sweet look and squeezing his arm.

‘Well—as soon as we are married, we shall very likely cut them,’ he said, rising and leading me towards the drawing-rooms. ‘For as far as your sister is concerned, she hates me! Why? It is a long story: but I will tell you this much. I did her what I judged to be a good turn on several occasions. Then, when I found out that it would really have been far better for her if I had left it alone, I made up my mind, for her good, not to be talked over by her any more: and as I had the pluck to continue to say “no,” she detests me!’

‘But—why should you do things for her?’ I asked. I shrewdly guessed he had lent her money to pay her gambling debts. ‘She is nothing to you!’

‘Why do men help women in a pickle? Because they are asses,’ he returned. ‘I was an ass! But I

am glad I have told you—because if she is angry with you for marrying me you will understand.'

'I certainly shall not,' I said. 'I think that if Flo is impertinent enough to be angry with you for marrying her sister, she is not what I thought her; she is envious that I should have you to do things for me and she can't. Still, she has Regy, and I believe she could get on very well with him if she chose to!'

'You mean to get on with me, don't you, darling?' he said. Meanwhile that was the beginning of the worry which has drawn those lines on my face, and made me look quite old, and feel as if I were a hundred.

Next day every one was occupied in talking over our wedding. (I can hardly believe that Thursday will see me 'Mrs Delincourt.') It is to be in the Dad's chapel, and my cheerful (no, convivial) Bishop is 'delighted to come.' The floral decorations will be masses of lilies. I am to carry lilies too—evidently the Dad is quite in love with purity in all shapes and forms. Mother, too, is and must have been almost prudish. Well, I don't mind a lily wedding! We start for a grand 'spree' on the Continent early in the afternoon. The wedding is at ten o'clock—with loads of music and singing. Only 'the relatives and closest friends,' the newspaper paragraphs had it. My dress is the purest white satin, quite plain. The Dad insisted on a plain veil, with only a spray of orange-blossom in my hair. (He says marriage is a sacrament, and we ought not to be more dressed up for that than for Confirmation, which he says is also a sacrament. He must have forgotten his Church Catechism, 'two only,' *et cetera*.) Well, as soon as the lengthy service

is at an end, breakfast will be served for us all in the big dining-room, while a huge feast of meat and pudding will be served to the village folk in a marquee in the park.

All this was discussed the day after everything had been settled. *That* was not the trouble. My anxiety and worry began with a strange letter which was on my tea-tray when Pexton came in with the tea and hot water the following morning.

It was from Flo.

'MY DEAR NELL' (I whistled, and prepared for squalls), 'I can hardly believe my senses. But rumour must be lying once more. It is absolutely impossible that you can be engaged to marry Colonel Delincourt. Our parents could not, would not, permit such a thing! The Duke and Isabel must be raving mad to have allowed such a thing to happen under their roof. *If you were anywhere else in the world but Skye Castle* I should have been with you instead of writing this *solemn warning*: better jump out of the window or drown yourself than trust yourself to *him*. Wire me at once, darling—"no"—to relieve my wretched anxiety on your behalf. Indeed, I would rather see you dead than *his* wife! Your loving, half-distracted sister,

'FLO.'

Distracted? I never saw such a wild scrawl. But she had forgotten to put 'private.' So there was but one thing to do—to show the letter to Henry and ask him to explain it, if he could!

## VIII

DEDCOTE PRIORY, *May —th.*—It was a horrid letter for any girl to receive, especially from a friend of her future husband who is also her own sister, on the eve of her marriage. But I did not feel it so much a shock as I should have done after Henry's explanation of what he had refused to do for her. I know Flo! She hates every one and everything which interferes with her whims.

So I was careful to be very nice to him at breakfast-time, then coaxed him out into those stately gardens. As soon as we were in a safe place where we could see any one coming for a quarter of a mile on every side, I said, 'I have had a letter from Flo.'

He was very quiet for a few moments. Then he said, 'Is it a nice letter? I expected she would be savage with us both—the innocent and the guilty would share her anger.'

'You shall judge,' I said, producing the letter.

Before he began reading it he lit a cigarette, and started smoking. (His deliberation showed he did not care very much for Madam Flo's opinion, one way or the other, which seemed to relieve my mind, I hardly knew why, for I don't care myself whether Flo is pleased or not.) Then he read the letter—once, twice, and quietly refolded it and handed it back to me.

'Well?' I said.

'Oh! She is in one of her towering rages. Poor

old Regy knows them well! Don't take any notice of her letter, darling! I will manage to see her when I have time, in town. I forgot to tell you—I have to go up this afternoon, and I question whether I shall be able to come back here—but I will join you when you are at home as soon as I possibly can.'

I had had no idea that he would have to leave me, and so soon, and for days and days perhaps—and my regret, and thinking how frightfully dull I should be without him, made me forget Flo's extraordinary letter. Of course, he must be in London. He has no end of things to see to. Not only clothes—he has to have as many interviews with his tailor as with his lawyers about settlements and a will and things of that sort—but seeing firms about the doing-up of the houses, especially the town-house which he has not yet lived in, and Maybury Towers, 'the cradle of the future Delincourts,' as he terms it, where we are to 'rusticate' when the fancy takes us.

At three o'clock he went: and I could hardly bear the place. I was so mopy, indeed, that Bellona packed us off home, and when I was here once more (how odd and strange everything looked, and how old-fashioned and funny Miss Grimston seemed) dressmakers and people were telephoned for, and the torture of standing an hour at a time to have things fitted began.

This—home—is not so utterly dull as Skye Castle—and *he* has not been here yet, so I don't miss him so much. The Dad is all agog about my marriage and the ceremony in the chapel. Men are down from some churchy firm making alterations, and everything is to be brand-new for the ceremony. He is corresponding

actively with my bucolic Bishop, arguing with him about introducing this thing or that, and he gives us the benefit of their discussions by letter at meal-times. Mother is absorbed in the subject of my trousseau. She is always getting patterns, and wants me to help her choose materials and lace edgings and styles—but I get away and go up to that spot in the wood and—*gloom*.

Yes—I have a horrid weight upon my spirits. I do believe I am beginning to be a jealous creature! I am jealous that he knew and was such friends with Flo before I met him. I went over each detail of our first meeting each time I sat where we had sat together under the hedge. I believe he was waiting for Flo in the wood—that he came out to look at me out of curiosity—and that that repeated ‘cooee’ was for him. *And I don't like it.* I believe she is fond of him, and that is why she is in such a state of mind about our marriage. Fie upon you, Elinor Dorothea! After such a confession on paper, I will write no more to-day, but make a struggle to be in a better humour.

June 1st.—Thank goodness, the ‘merry month of May’ is over! Henry wrote and wired, all quiet nice, but I *should* like him to long to see me as I long to see him again.

And now another nasty thing has happened. Lady Treverton’s favourite niece, Daisy Westerfield, married the Honourable Lionel Wynward some years ago—and to our astonishment she called one day and was ushered into the garden where we were having tea—a pretty little woman, very slim and girlish, with a quantity of rich red hair all shining under a green hat

smothered with hops and their leaves. After she had greeted mother quite effusively, reminding her of their last meeting (at some school-treat at Treverton when she was in short frocks) she took both my hands and to my astonishment pulled me towards her and kissed me on both cheeks. <sup>2</sup>

'You must forgive me—but your future husband is such a very old and dear friend of ours that I cannot refrain from hailing you as one in the future,' she said very prettily. 'But, where is he? In town? For the day? No? You astonish me! He must indeed be improving in self-denial if he can keep away for more than twenty-four hours!'

Then the Dad appeared, walking across the lawn like a stern old monk who had been informed of a contraband female on the premises. He was as stiff as a poker! But she is an awfully clever little woman—in five minutes she had made him giggle and bridle. I felt I should like to have some lessons from her how to manage these male monsters. I can make them dislike me (witness Lord Danebury), but to thaw a frozen lay parson like the Dad. It needs genius. I went with her willingly to show her the grounds and houses before the Dad showed her the chapel. She began at once talking of the wedding presents. She was commissioned by her people as well as by her husband to find out what I should prefer. Of course, lots of wedding presents had appeared, but I had but little interest in them, and I said so.

'But—my dear child, excuse my calling you so, but you look so young, I assure you that you must learn to be interested in everything—or you will rue it!' she

significantly said. We were at the end of the gardens—and she seated herself on the low wall which separates them from the park, and looked seriously up into my eyes. 'Forgive a word in season from an old married woman, won't you?'

'What do you mean—what shall I "rue"?' I promptly asked. 'If my husband loves me—he will love me as I am!'

She shrugged her shoulders and shook her head.

'Those are the husbands in books, my dear, not the living, breathing men of the day,' she said. 'And—above all—a man like Harry Delincourt! Why, every woman in Society, pretty well, has set her cap at him—I almost think it is lucky for you that he has been so much the man about town, plunged in everything which came along, that he could not be captured and held in a vice by any Delilah of the lot! But, you have a difficult game to play—I wouldn't be in your shoes for something!'

My heart suddenly fell down inside me like a stone into a deep well. I gasped. I must have shown what I felt, for she put her hand on mine, drew me down by her, and soothed me, told me not to be startled—perhaps everything was for the best.

'Harry Delincourt is no chicken, dear, fortunately,' she went on. 'He has tasted everything there is to taste except an innocent child just out of the school-room such as you—and really there is no reason, if you are wise in time why you should not turn him round your little finger. Only you must be wise! By the way, what does your sister Lady Wendell say to your engagement? He was quite her faithful knight—was,

I really think, tied to her apron-string longer than to any one's. We attributed your engagement to your striking likeness to her. I am afraid you will have to put up with their friendship. Under the circumstances, I advise you to sink jealousy. She has greater reason to be jealous of you than you of her—remember that !'

'But—my sister is only his friend, as you and other ladies are,' I said, feeling as if she had stabbed me to the quick. 'I shall be his wife !'

'And his possession, to do exactly as he likes with—to take or to leave—oh, every married woman knows how powerless *she* is !' she cried bitterly. 'The best of the husbands are more easily managed by the female friend—of any kind—than by the wife ! It seems to me as if they resent being tied to a woman from the very first moment of marriage to the last !'

'Then—if that is so—why do they marry ?' I asked, clinging to a shred of evidence against her horrid statements. 'No woman wants to force a man to marry her against his ideas of happiness.'

'Ah,' said she thoughtfully, 'but, you see, when a man has property, and loads of money, he wants a son to inherit it. He must marry ! Colonel Delincourt was looked upon as a confirmed bachelor until that old miser grandfather died, and left him half a million. Then we knew he was bound to be a Benedict. I am glad it was you, dear ! I believe you will keep him. You have only one thing to do—be wax under his will. Sink every feeling—sacrifice every idea of what is nice or proper, and appear enraptured. Shut your eyes to any absences of his—never ask him where he has been, even if he stays out all night—get him to talk

—admire all he says—live to plan his meals, and see the *chef* and his myrmidons do their duty—if he yawns, be ready to go to bed. If he is lively and wideawake, be ready to stay up. It is all very easy, after all! And I can promise you, if you persist, you will keep him to yourself as much as a man of his sort can be kept! Above all, don't quarrel with your sister—for she has unbounded influence over him!

Although I felt as if I should be glad—really glad—if the earth would open and swallow me up, I felt there was much good advice in what she said; I knew it was the 'fellow-feeling which makes wondrous kind' which made her say it. So I thanked her—humbly—but suggested that she might write it all down.

She laughed, and shook her head. 'Not if I know it,' she said. 'I have a holy horror of documentary evidence! But here comes Sir Eustace.' (My father was evidently coming to find us.) 'We shan't have a word more together—but do be friends with me, dear! You will want a friend—and I will stick to you like a burr if you will let me!'

I told her I should be only to glad and thankful. But I felt wretched. As I went along and through the chapel where she admired everything ecstatically, and I could hear that the Dad was explaining all his arrangements for the ceremony and enjoying her little exclamations of astonishment as he seldom enjoys anything, it seemed a horrible nightmare—that conversation with her. I was thankful when she took herself off. I don't think one can feel exactly grateful to the most well-meaning persons when they tell us dreadful things such as those she told me! I was not exactly pleased

when the Dad praised her up, and said that she was a most 'thoughtful and intelligent woman,' asking whether she had had an invitation to the wedding—which was equivalent to an order that one should be sent, and I was relieved by mother's reply, that she 'did not really think we could make room for a single person more.'

However, just as that conversation was in progress—it was at dessert—the door opened, and Henry came in—and straight up to me. He looked so cheerful and innocent, and kissed me so affectionately, that my conscience smote me. My wretched doubts evaporated one by one as he sat eating his dinner, which was brought back for him, course after course—and my poor heart gave a big throb of delight when he said, after the Dad told him that we were discussing the possibility of inviting his old frind, Mrs Wynward, to the wedding, but that mother was afraid there was not room, 'That will be all right! There are two refusals—Regy and his wife. Flo has the flu—rather a nasty attack, Regy is afraid, and he does not care to leave her.'

Fancy his calling her 'Flo'—and speaking quite nicely about her! *After that letter!* He did not look at me while he was talking about her, but when we were alone in mother's boudoir, side by side on her big, soft sofa, I said, 'Well! Did you see Flo?'

'I did—and gave her a good talking to,' he answered, with a laugh. 'I made her promise not to gamble for a whole year, on certain conditions. She is in such a tight corner that she had to eat humble pie and accede to my demands, and we parted amicably. But I can't help thinking that the interview gave her the "flu."'

After that I felt better—until something else happened which has made me desperately uncomfortable. This time it is I myself I have to quarrel with for being rash, silly—oh! everything but careful and prudent.

My wedding-dress arrived late in the afternoon, while Henry had gone to the station to meet his best man, a Captain Dred Wilmot, D.S.O.—a regular fighting soldier, who seems to have begun his career at school, where he fought and punished the 'bully' for molesting the small boys, Henry among them. By rights he ought not to be 'best man,' for he was married himself when quite a young man—a love-match—she and her baby died eighteen months later. He worked his way into the army a roundabout way, but the Boer War came, and he was gazetted Captain very soon after—'conspicuous acts of bravery in the field. Henry is full of him. When I want to talk of other things, he begins about 'Dred Wilmot.' I was prepared to hate the name before the incident which will make it a detestable sound to me 'for all eternity.'

As I say, my wedding-dress arrived while Henry was absent, and when Pexton had unpacked it and arranged it on the dummy, it was really exquisite. While this was doing, I heard the motor-car below—and looking out, saw the top of Henry's cap—and as he had evidently returned alone without his fighting-friend I slipped downstairs by the back staircase. I hunted for him high and low. Finally, on opening the billiard-room door, and peeping in, I saw him lying back in his favourite 'porter's chair,' evidently composing himself for the siesta he loves on a warm day. Then an idea came to me. To put on my white

finery and appear suddenly, ghostlike, round the corner. I felt, somehow, that it would do him good.

Pexton, when I suggested dressing up and letting Henry see me, got quite hysterical with horror. 'It was the unluckiest thing in the world—no one never did it,' et cetera. I was determined *not* to be superstitious. So I said I must 'try on'—to which she could make no reasonable objection—and when I stood before the long glass and saw the lovely shining white robe and the filmy veil under which I looked as innocent and simple as a very young girl in her Confirmation dress, I sent her off to find mother, knowing well that mother was out worrying the gardeners about to-morrow's flowers—she had told me she meant to ("as my dear father was not practical enough to manage those people") at luncheon. As soon as I had, by subterfuge, driven Pexton off the field, I was off—stepping cautiously down the big staircase into the deserted hall. The door stood open. I saw the heat rising from the ground outside, and heard drowsy remarks on the part of the birds that nest in our ivy and chimneys—and I knew that most of the inhabitants of the Priory were drowsing. I would make a little 'tableau' for the man who will to-morrow be my husband.

I stole along the corridor. I opened the door as gingerly as poor Ginevra (I have read that poem lately) lifted the lid of the great chest where she was suffocated before she could scream loud enough to be heard, and when I saw his legs—he was wearing stockings and knickerbockers—I shut it again so carefully that I myself could not hear a sound. Then I stood, listening.

What? He had often fallen asleep in the hammock under the trees at Skye Castle, while I was yawning in a deck lounge at his side. But he had never snored. And what I heard was nothing more or less than a *snore*.

Oh, well! I thought—it is best to know what is before one in the future—and really, anything which belittles him in a way and makes me feel more on a level with his Majesty is a distinct boon. So I stepped along the side of the billiard-table as cautiously as a cat when she is after a mouse—and when I reached the chair, bent over and kissed his forehead. . . .

Then, rising, I gave a little gasp—I was too frightened to yell—for it was not Henry! I had kissed another man!

I saw two large round eyes staring out of a big round face—then the man who was wearing clothes exactly like those Henry was wearing to-day sat up. Turning an ugly white colour, he gripped the chair-arms, still staring as if I was a ghost or evil spirit—then he muttered—‘Oh, my God! My dream!’

‘Who are you?’ I cried. ‘I thought you were Henry. Oh, what shall I do? Do you understand?’

He rose up—light in his dull gray eyes—and towered above me like a giant! (He *is* that!)

‘Perfectly he said, evidently wideawake. I noticed that my friend Colonel Delincourt was wearing a similiar suit to mine—you expected him, and found me. Will you forgive me for being myself instead of him?’

He held out a big hand. Of course I laid mine in it, and he shook it in what I felt was a patronising manner.

‘It was my fault—I ought to be punished for making such an absurd mistake,’ I faltered, getting hotter

and hotter as I hated myself more and more. 'I suppose you are Captain Wilmot? But—can you tell me where Henry is?' I ended up with a sob. I could not help it—fortunately it was a dry sob. He would hardly have noticed it.

'Well—really I can hardly say,' he slowly replied. 'He came to meet me, but sent me on here, as he had to talk to various people through the telephone. He did not know when he would turn up; he said I was to send the motor-car back to the station to wait for him. At this time of the day the telephones are mostly actively at work.'

'I hope you have been attended to? Properly, I mean? I think my father is in the chapel with the decorators, and mother superintending the gardeners in the garden.'

I had hardly spoken before I dreaded that he might laugh. I had welcomed him—and with a kiss! But—he is a gentleman. He behaved exactly as if nothing had happened.

'Thanks, your butler was forewarned,' he said. 'He offered me tea, refreshments of all kinds—wanted to fetch you all, or at all events one of you—and would hardly believe me when I said that all I wanted was a doze in the billiard-room in the chair Colonel Delincourt liked so much. Henry told me about it—he loves this chair, and really, with good reason! I quite enjoyed forty winks. You see, I was up all last night. An old comrade of mine was dying, and asked for me.'

'Oh! That is why you snored,' I said sympathetically. 'I hope that your friend did not mind your leaving him?'

'He is beyond minding anything,' he said. 'He died. . . . I don't think, otherwise, I could be here now.'

I wished he hadn't been. I felt sorry—sorry for him, so tired, sorry for the comrade who died, and sorriest of all for myself. For what a hideous thing—the day before marriage, and in one's wedding dress, to kiss, of one's own accord, another man than one's bridegroom!

Just while I was mumbling some incoherent words of sympathy I heard the toot-toot of Henry's car. For one instant I felt mad—then I turned to him.

'You won't tell him?' I gasped. 'Don't! Pretend you have not seen me—'

'Your wishes shall be my law,' he returned a little stiffly—and I fled. Pexton had not returned from her search for mother. I took off my finery, and donning a dressing-gown, lay down on my bed. I was determined to have a headache, and not to appear again.

I did not want to tell lies, so I was almost glad when a violent headache *did* set in. When Henry came back, he was tremendously kind. He bathed my head with eau-de-cologne, and fed me with the soups I elected to have instead of my dinner. . . .

Later, when I was alone, I got up. Now I am writing this, my last entry before I become a wedded wife. How horrible, how perfectly detestable, that my last act as a single girl should be to kiss a strange man! If I believed in the devil, as the Dad does, I should say it was the invention of 'old Gooseberry,' as Regy calls him.

## IX

WIESBADEN, *July 20th*.—It is all over—I am hanged, drawn, and quartered—I mean, married! Well, marriage is like execution in a way—it ends one person *in toto*. Elinor Perpetua Dedcote no longer exists.

I often, during this blessed month of so-called 'honeymoon,' have pinched myself to see if it was really not a dream. Dream of bliss? Oh dear no! A dream of disenchantment.

Yet, why? I keep on telling myself I ought to be in the seventh heaven of delight, any other girl would. But I am myself, not another girl, unfortunately.

Henry has gone on a day's excursion in the forests, as they call the woods here, with some Germans. Judging by what I have seen, they will return in their carriage shouting, singing, and waving their caps, and the people in the streets will watch them and wave too—and these are not beanfeasters—common men—but people that are well-to-do and in good society. Only men—Germans don't seem to take out their women-folk when they really mean to enjoy themselves. 'They show great common sense in that,' Henry said.

'And what do the women do?' I asked, disgusted.

'Oh! Meet at each other's houses, knit, drink coffee, and tell scandalous stories. Herr von Rasch told me yesterday that if it wasn't for his wife he would not know what was going on—he hadn't the time to find out for himself.'

'That is rather slanderous, I must say! I am glad I am not a German woman!' I cried indignantly, determined to be stiffer than ever with that great porpoise, Herr von Rasch, when I next see him, in spite of his bows and scrapes and grins, and stares through his spectacles. Old owl!

Meanwhile, he has got Henry safe for the day, and has given me the opportunity to write up my Diary. I was determined to bring the book and go on with it, but Henry never was absent long enough for me to venture. He is such a tyrant, he would have it to look at, unless I threw it out of the window. (One can't throw things into the fires here, not only because it is summer, but because there *are* none. Stoves and pipes—not even logs on dogs, as in France.)

All these weeks I have longed to write down everything just as it happened—principally because it may help me to find out what has disappointed me so much—what is making me inwardly fret and fume and at my worst moments making me wish myself 'anywhere, anywhere, out of the world!'

I will begin at the beginning, my wedding day. I did not leave my own room till it was time for the ceremony. Dad sent up, as agreed. (Every one was in the chapel already.) I went downstairs in an empty house and found the Dad, in a long frock-coat with an orchid in his buttonhole and his Matins face on, at the foot of the stairs. He said something which sounded like a text or a versicle, and put my hand on his arm so solemnly that I nearly burst out laughing. I struggled so hard not to giggle all the way up the chapel under the arches of white flowers that I did not dare

look either to my right or to my left—I only thanked my lucky stars that Regy was not there—he might have made his funny face which always made me roar—Regy never is serious—and then I should have burst out, I could not have helped it. I made up my mind I wouldn't raise my eyes, for fear of seeing the Bishop's nose, which also seemed to tickle me—I just let the Dad lead me up to the altar and kept my eyes down—glued to the embroidered cushions before the rails—I learnt their pattern by heart through the much too lengthy service. There were voluntaries and hymns and ever so much too much religious service—and somehow, religion and Henry don't seem to belong to one another in any way.

That well over, we went down the chapel together, Henry and I, to the sound of the march in *Lohengrin*, and into the library—and there I had a horrid ordeal.

They all came flocking in, the Bishop, our clergyman and his curate, Snuffles and Bellona, mother and the Dad, and a few of our oldest friends. My little bridesmaids had baskets of favours and pestered every one all round, while the clergy, still in surplices and as much vestment decoration as the Bishop, obliging though he is, dared allow, were fidgeting with the certificate books.

The Dad was in his glory, arguing out something, and the Bishop smiled serenely and listened; so did the others. Finally the awkward point, whatever it was, was satisfactorily settled, and I signed my name, Elinor Perpetua Dedeote, for the last time, and slipped away into a distant corner while Henry and the rest

signed theirs. (Only the selected few—the rest were in the drawing-room.)

I was thankful to be quiet for just a moment—I was almost hidden behind a Japanese screen—when to my horror I saw the ‘best man,’ Captain Wilmot, making straight for me. He had one of those silly ‘favours’ in his hand.

‘I have a request to make, Mrs Delincourt, after I have wished you all possible happiness,’ he said, smiling down upon me like some kindly giant. ‘Will you pin this on for me—if it is not too much to ask?’

There was such a comical expression in his violet eyes—some would have called them sea-green, but then they looked to me more the colour of the Parma violets in the violet-house at Skye Castle—that, remembering that awful kiss when I thought he was Henry asleep, I turned red all over I should think, as I laid aside my sheaf of lilies and looking vaguely about for a pin prepared to do what he asked.

‘A pin?’ he asked. ‘I have been best man before, and thinking something of this sort would be going forward, I came provided.’

He had a sort of little housewife—with needles and cotton and scissors and pins. As I picked out a pin likely to do he made me feel less discomfited by telling me the case had been through his South African and other campaigns with him.

‘Why did you come without your medals and orders and things?’ I stupidly asked—only realising I had been idiotic when he laughed and immediately checked it.

‘To-day the only order wearable is this bestowed

by Mrs Delincourt,' he returned—just as Henry came up.

'I suppose the proper thing now is to kiss my wife!' he jubilantly said. 'You understand about these things, old man.'

'Certainly,' said Captain Wilmot, upon which Henry stooped and kissed my lips. It was a rough kiss—and even now when I remember that my husband's first kiss to his wife was rough, careless, as if his mind were no more in it than a carthorse's when a fly stings him and he kicks, I feel a sore kind of pain.

'I suppose they will all be wanting to follow my example, but don't you let them, Mrs Delincourt!' cried Henry. (I had never seen him in this excitable humour before.) 'Of course, I don't mean you, old man! You may kiss my wife if you like—she can never in her life be kissed by a better man!'

He laughed and went off—I shrank in horror—but Captain Wilmot laughed so genially, and lifting my hand touched it so delicately with his lips, wishing me every earthly good, every happiness here and hereafter, that I was quite consoled, and for the rest of the bother and nuisance was as it were 'clothed and in my right mind.'

For bother and nuisance it all was. There was a long wait in the drawing-room, when people kept on repeating inane congratulations, every one asking the same old questions—what time we should start for our honeymoon; where we should spend it, *et cetera*—and all the time I knew they were dying to get the 'breakfast' over and be off after their own personal concerns. I was glad that after the little favour

ceremony in the library, Captain Wilmot kept his distance—and that, when every one paired after 'luncheon was served' and went two and two into the big dining-room, it happened that he sat at the end of the top table of the T, where I couldn't possibly see him.

The luncheon—*déjeuner*—was really good. Bellona's *chef* and our head cook had rivalled one another in inventing dishes which looked nice—I only had a little soup and chicken. But I felt silly, sitting by Henry at the top of the table opposite the cake—we must have looked exactly like a wedding-cake advertisement I saw on a hoarding in our town come to life.

The Bishop made a little speech (it seemed to me as if he treated the whole affair as a little ecclesiastical jest); then Henry thanked him in the same kind of manner—as if they were acting a part, and secretly poking fun at the Dad. At one part of the lengthy business I had to cut the cake—at least, our butler made the first incision with a specially sharpened knife, then I cut huge slices, then he cut them into tiny lumps and they were handed round. . . . What were the other speeches? They seemed as stupid as they were interminable—all but Captain Wilmot's. Some one proposed the health of the bridesmaids (an absurdity, those tiny chits!), but really that man—Henry—spoke so sensibly and sweetly about those twins that I did not wonder every one applauded quite enthusiastically.

Casting back, it looks very like my wedding having been a one-part play—and that one part the best man. He seemed to have knit the bundles of incongruities

together and prevented the friction of the various opinionated units. He stood out, a living creature against a muddled background of unreal people. My one acute memory is of him—when I was dressed for my journey (like a good little girl from school, in white that a child of ten might have worn)—coming to me and leading me aside.

‘One word with you, Mrs Delincourt,’ he said in a decided kind of way. (He was quite the Captain then.) ‘I have had many friends who have ceased to be my intimate friends when they married—and the excuse was, on the part of the husbands, that their wives objected to me. May I hope that you will not frown upon my friendship with Henry, whom I knew as a small boy at school?’

I don’t know why, but I felt a rush of feeling—a kind of grateful, devoted, admiring feeling for this big, kind man who had treated me with such tender delicacy. I put my gloved hand on his, and looked up through the tears which pricked my eyes.

‘If you would only be my friend as well,’ I faltered.

‘I will, till death, God helping me,’ he said, with *such* a look! I never saw that expression in human eyes before—but then, I have never before met a man like Captain Wilmot.

\* \* \* \* \*

(I have put those stars on purpose—noticing that when writers of books want the readers to add things for themselves in their own minds, they do it. I will put another lot, to absolutely and completely divide that sweet little minute from what I have to tell.)

\* \* \* \* \*

Henry and I are exact opposites. He is of the earth, earthly. And I know, now—he and marriage have taught me—that by imagining one could live one's life as people do in poems like Shelley's, one is—well—mad.

I had expected that the first time we were alone together as man and wife he would show some emotion. Henry the *lover* had been harping upon 'the moment when I should be all his'—he had hinted unutterable things how he would teach me the alphabet of Love from A to Z, and the rest of it.

Of course, I thought, he will take me in his arms and kiss me—and put my arm round his neck—and say, 'At last—my Love!—my Wife!' and at the word wife he would melt—tears would be in his eyes. That would be *A* of the alphabet. Then he would start *B*, whatever that might be, and I thrilled at the thought of the ecstasies in store for me. What did Henry the *husband* do?

When the train started—express to Dover—I felt almost faint with anticipation as he settled the windows, and packed the light things on the racks, joking about Pexton's scared look when he put her into her carriage (Pexton travels as far as Paris with us, to stay until I have engaged a French maid: Henry's wish). Then he came and sat down by me, took off his cap, puffed and blowed, slapped the dust from his knees, said, 'Hallo, where's the fruit-basket?' (A little basket of peaches, nectarines, and grapes had been put into the carriage for our refection during the journey.) Then, when he found it, he asked me whether I would have one.

'I know I'm confoundedly thirsty after all the silly fuss,' he said, then he seemed to see something in my expression which made him leave the hateful basket alone, and sitting down again, put his arm round me and said, 'Give us a kiss, old girl, now that everything's jolly well over.' '*Old girl!!*' '*Jolly well over!!!*'

'Something's wrong! Out with it, little woman!' he said, not unkindly, but oh, so differently! 'What have I done? Eh? Tell me at once! We must begin as we mean to go on, and once and for all we must have common sense. It is our only chance not to end up in fireworks, as so many do!'

'You have done—nothing,' I said chokingly. 'But I hardly know you in this humour.'

'Bosh!' he said, but he squeezed me closer. 'I confess I was a bit put out about your get-up. You were a schoolgirl, but that is over and done with. When you dressed for that confounded ceremony you were my wife-to-be—and ought to have worn that lace I actually went to Brussels myself to get. Whose notion was it to dress you like that?'

'It was my father's wish,' I faltered.

'For goodness' sake, don't cry—it is all right—you shall have another wedding-gown for your presentation and I will get some more lace for your train. I spoke to Isabel about it. She thought you had better wait till next season, when married life will have licked you into shape.' ('Licked me into shape!!!')

'Now you are trying me,' I said, spurred into resentment. 'You are imitating Petruchio! Don't.' I seized his arm and looked up into his eyes with all my

heart and soul. 'Be—*my* Henry—the Henry I loved!'

'I am your husband now, dear, and you must not expect me to lie at your feet and sigh and die! That was when I had not got you. Now I have!'

'You said—marriage would make no difference,' I bitterly said. 'And it did—at once! What do I mean? Why, the very first kiss you gave me as my husband was the roughest I ever had from any one!'

He sprang from me in pretended horror. 'What? You have been in the habit of allowing people to kiss you?' he exclaimed. 'Bah! Don't let us play about, like a couple of babes in the wood! I know you haven't. I know I have made you in love with me, and that it has not been easy work, although you fascinated me at first sight, you little witch! Some men would not have understood you, but I did. I saw you were a romantic little schoolgirl, living in a fool's paradise—so I let you remain there—I was an Adam and you my Eve—until I walked you out, past the flaming sword! Eve—until I walked you out, past the flaming sword! Then—You have still to pass that flaming sword! Then—you must settle down in the commonplace world—my wife—and, dear, I hope, the mother of our children!'

'Neither Bellona nor Flo have any children,' I said, feeling uncomfortable.

'You need not blush,' he said. 'If you had been a different sort of girl, I should have been more open with you—treated you in another way altogether. But it wouldn't do with you! I had to fool you to the top of your bent, read Shelley and Swinburne and Rosetti and the rest of the rotters that gas about the tie between man and woman and make all the mischief!'

I groaned and I meant it. For I realised that he was not acting—not pretending to be a Petruchio—that he had cruelly deceived me.

'If,' I said, drawing away from him, 'I had had any idea that you did not *want* to make love to me as you did—did not *like* to read poetry to me—I would have *died* rather than let you do it!'

'But I *did* want to kiss you and all that, I *did* like reading poetry to you—because it was all in the day's work of getting you as my wife,' he said. 'Come! Be sensible! I can see what you want to say, 'Then you do not really love me' and all that rot. Look at it in the right light. Should I have taken all that trouble, and sunk my own ideas and feelings to follow yours, unless I had wanted you for my wife more than any other of the girls I might have asked to marry me?'

'I suppose not,' I miserably said—and I felt miserable—bewildered—almost as if in a nightmare. Could this be my lover, Henry? His voice, his touch—all were there. But—his ways! Had they gone for ever?

'You ought not to have pretended to be what you certainly are not!' I cried. 'Here you have got me—tightly bound to you—and you are not the man I married!'

He chuckled, as if were a good joke. 'Oh yes, I am,' he said, drawing me to him and kissing my cheek, for I jerked away my lips. 'And you will turn round presently, and say I am perfection! You will see!'

But I did *not* see. I was disenchanted with the idea

of marriage when he began 'my initiation,' as he called it, by telling me anecdotes related to him by friends who had got married, and others which, he said, 'always set a whole roomful of people in a roar.' I saw nothing to laugh at. Common, vulgar, banal—that is what I call married life after the delicious, deceptive time of courtship. . . .

He says that all men 'fool' the women they marry, if necessary, before they have got them—'just as we should not catch fish without baiting the hook' is his way of explaining it; sometimes, he says, it is the other way round—the women cajole and capture the men. They have tried it on with him, and he used this as an argument to convince me that he loves me better than he has loved others.

*He has loved others!!!* Although, of course, if I had known anything at all of real life, I should have also known that he could not have lived over forty years without liking some one very much—it did sicken me, alienate me from him, somehow. He had to remind me that the duty of a wife is to fall in with her husband's ways before I could bear him near me.

*Then*—when I gave in to all his wishes as a *duty*—it had a singular effect. (I am going to be truthful in this book—however untruthful marriage may succeed in making me.) The first time I did every thing he liked as a *duty*, all delight in his touch, his kisses, his nearness, went like a flash!

*Do I love him?* Ah! In these first days of this strange revelation of the marriage tie—at least, strange to me—I ask myself that question—and, at first, answer myself 'No!'

Then, when the first disgust at the commonness of it all is over, I am in doubt. I seem to feel, in quiet hours, a kinship with him—more like that I have felt with mother. I am glad of this. I suppose it is the beginning of the wife's proper feeling for her husband, and I will cherish and cultivate it *as much as ever I can.*

• • • • •  
We spent a fortnight in Paris, and he was in such high spirits, and enjoyed everything so much, that I felt a relieved sort of sensation. *I enjoyed nothing—except a faint hope that as time went on he would be more like the old Henry, and I should begin to love him again in the old way.*

Now, I feel as if Henry, my love, had vanished, and a sort of grown-up changeling had been provided by the evil fairies. I am glad that we are 'on the go' from morning till night. In Paris it was one long whirl. I saw all the sights, morning, noon, and night. I watched him forgetting me and becoming absorbed in the fancy of the hour—and 'mourned and mourned and mourned'—like the love in that old song mother really sang very touchingly—mourned over my lost love, who never was a reality at all. . . .

I love pictures, but they bore Henry. We *rushed* through the Louvre and other picture-galleries. Music was ecstasy (why does it wring my heart now?). *He* likes 'quick-step' marches and music-hall things. According to his idea of my wifely duties, I accompanied him to music-halls, and pretended to laugh at what I neither liked nor understood. (What an actress in daily life I am getting to be!)

I hate Paris—all but the 'Bois' and Fontainebleau and places where a sad but sweet sensation came to me—as if, indeed, the trees and the plants and all the green, living things had some kind of knowledge of what I was feeling, and while they pitied me, whispered that one day all would be well. . . .

An old saw—who wrote the lines? I must find out—keeps running in my head:

'Tis better to have loved and lost,  
Than never to have loved at all.'

I didn't hear them from Miss Grimston. Her ideas of English poetry were the book of 'Select Ballads' and extracts from Shakespeare, Pope, Dryden, and old dry-as-dusts of that kind. Shall I ever forget

'Lo, the poor Indian, whose untutored mind . . .'

I learnt those lines as a punishment lesson for speaking 'in an unseemly manner' to her; something à propos of the Dad, if I remember rightly. And I incurred her fresh displeasure by saying that I thought the Indian quite right in thinking his dog would 'bear him company' in the next state. I was quite sure our dogs would go to heaven, if there was such a place! Why shouldn't they? They can't sin, according to religion. (By the way, I often wish I could change Henry into one of our dogs, especially when we are out walking. He does talk so stupidly, and they *do hunt*.)

This is a digression—only it is such a relief to pour out my thoughts to *something*, that I can't help it. I

was going to remark that Miss Grimston, having been partly educated in Germany, taught me some German, and dragged me through part of Schiller's *Thirty Years' War* and a little of his play *Wallenstein*, to which I 'applied myself better,' as she termed it. Why? Because I was interested in the love-affair between Max and that sweet Thekla—who said so pathetically:—

'Ich habe gelebt und geliebet.'

That is what *I* say, now. . . . I have lived; I have loved an imaginary Henry Delincourt, and have to pay for my whistle by living for the rest of my life with the real one!

I was delighted to leave Paris and go to Thekla's land. We went up the Rhine—and if only Henry were *my* imaginary Henry, and the Germans less common and coarse, I should have realised the true joy I had expected. Still, I enjoyed the scenery—and could imagine how lovely it would seem if one were heart to heart and hand in hand with a real, true lover. . . .

Then we stopped here—Wiesbaden—principally because Henry had these friends, Herr von Rasch and his family. The wife is tall and gaunt, and wears a huge apron and rattles her keys. She showed me her kitchen and store-room and linen presses, and her '*Herr Je's*' and '*Ach, so's*' when she found that ladies in England don't mess about in the offices, but relegate the common domestic duties to trained servants were something to hear! She immediately said that being wealthy or titled did not prevent German ladies from actively superintending their households. Indeed, it

seems the Empress herself makes a tour of the offices every morning, dressed in just such an apron as Frau von Rasch's and her daughters (for her daughters dust the china and bric-à-brac and help to make the handsome if barely furnished house look 'like a new pin.')

I shall not imitate a German 'Hausfrau.' Henry praised them up to the skies. He calls them 'real wives,' whether because he really admires them or to tease me I don't know. I suspect the latter, for he leaves no opportunity of 'chaffing' me, in every way, including a way I *loathe*,<sup>\*</sup> without taking fullest advantage of it. (I must end—I had no idea it was so late.)

## X

MAYBURY TOWERS, *July —th.*—I am *at home!* The firm that had to put this place in order outside and in deserve great praise for doing their work so well and expeditiously.

Maybury Towers is an old stone building with a tower and turrets. It really reminds me of some of those lesser German castles, and part of it is left in ruins for the look of the thing. It is not *huge*, but has plenty of rooms, upstairs and down; and there are many fine old pictures and a lot of old oak furniture—some really old, and other things which look just the same, imitation. There was a china room, with heaps of lovely things all hidden up—we have had it all out, and have arranged it about the house, in and out of cabinets. Really, my home is romantic-looking enough to make me long still more after my lost ideals. The gardens are delightful. Just around the house an old English garden—avenues of close-cropped box and yew, and the same cut into quaint shapes stud the smooth lawns. Beyond, there are different kinds of gardens; an Italian conventional one, with terraces and statues and flower-beds—and an irregular flower-garden, with all my old friends, monthly roses, moss roses, larkspur, hollyhocks, and the rest of the cottage things, not forgetting mignonette and balsam. The fruit and vegetable garden has a high red brick wall, all delicate little weeds and lichens at the top, and

wall-fruit, netted from the birds, below. The walks are of carefully kept grass, and converge upon a square of turf where there is a sundial, also a huge mulberry-tree, its branches propped up.

I have made friends with the gardeners, who always look pleased to see me when I appear where they are at work—and, so far, I have got on capitally with the domestic staff. The housekeeper was cook in Henry's family, and is a stout, good-humoured old woman, not in the least *airy*, and disposed to make the best of everything and of everybody, including my French maid Juliette, who has a temper of her own. 'I know them French maids, ma'am,' she said to me, when I spoke of Juliette's 'moods'—she managed to quarrel with other servants in every hotel we went to—'their bark is worse than their bite. I never take no notice of them myself—Frenchies will be Frenchies to the end of the chapter, as they say.'

Our *chef* is a nice English boy who has been apprenticed to a swell cook and certainly can serve as nice a dinner as you can get anywhere. While I was 'honeymooning' (*i.e.* learning to swallow my disappointment and get used to all the coarse commonplace of marriage) I had time to think a lot: and I came, among other conclusions, to these:—

Henry has no soul, and very little mind. His senses are his life. Knowing no spiritual or intellectual pleasures, his belong mostly to touch and taste. He sees with his eyes and hears with his ears merely to strengthen his sensual delights. For my own sake, I mean to fight against his attempts to lower me to the level of a mere animal, such as himself—but in his

eating and drinking and exercise of all kinds I will do everything in my power to be what he calls a 'real wife.'

So, in Wiesbaden, I learnt from Frau von Rasch how the dishes he had praised so enthusiastically were cooked, and asking her to 'keep it dark,' I actually made pigeon-soup, roasted 'sauerbraten' and boned and stuffed poultry, cooked 'sauerkraut,' and various soups and made 'nudeln.' I proposed, soon after we were settled here, to my good-natured young *chef* to show him the things. His nice blue eyes twinkled with pleasure, and I spent many mornings, at intervals, in the little kitchen (the two undercooks were going on with their work in the big one the while) trying to show him exactly what Frau von Rasch had shown me.

Henry was delighted—and I thought I had scored several points until he had made the vain remark, as we were sauntering in the gardens after dinner one day, that he began to think he had a gift for reforming people.

'I managed to sicken your sister of gambling,' he said, 'and as for you—you were a most dunderheaded and absurd little person when I first met you—and now you are really showing signs of promise.'

'May I ask what promise?' I asked—inwardly blazing but outwardly placid. What a mercy that I am learning to conceal my feelings!

'A promise of being almost as sensible a little woman as others I know and have known,' he answered—putting his arm about my shoulders. If I had given way to a strong inclination, I should have given him

a slap on his face which would have outwardly stung his flesh and inwardly warned him that he does not know and understand *everything*. But I had vowed to myself to be dignified—not to give him the chance of offering to degrade me worse than I *am* degraded—and fortunately I held myself as in a vice—and was saved—that time.

But it was a warning to me to try to end this *tête-à-tête* existence. We had dined with Snuffles and Bellona, and they had dined with us, but that was all. What I wanted was a house as full of visitors as it could be: and one day I suggested that we might have some people to stay.

It was after dinner (I took care of that—he is like Regy, wants to arrive at 'the nice glass' before he is negotiable). We were lounging on the terrace, below which the teapots and birds and crowns and things were black shapes against a sunset sky. I praised the place, and said, 'I was longing to show it to the people: couldn't we have some friends to stay?'

I am knitting socks for him—Frau von Rasch taught me—and I took to it because I *have* to look at my knitting—can't do it blindly like the German women do, and it prevents his reading my thoughts in my eyes. I did not *see* his expression of face—but he sat up suddenly in his wicker lounge, spat (he was smoking), and said, 'A jolly good idea! We must have Regy and Flo.'

'Will they come?' I asked, beginning to count my stitches. (I still care for him enough to feel a jealous pang when he speaks of Flo.)

'Won't they? They will jump at it!' he said.

'Then Flo has forgiven us?' I asked, still busy with my stitches.

'I told you I had settled matters with her when I was up in town before our wedding,' he pompously said. 'I hold her promise to stop gambling—also not to indulge in tantrums and upset my little woman who is really trying to do her duty.'

I had nearly flung my knitting at his head. This superior tone he adopts in talking to me is almost as trying as some of his coarse ways—some of his dreadful suggestions. How thankful I am I did not do it! Instead, I asked him if he would write to invite them, or should I?

'You write to Flo, and I will write to Regy,' he didactically said. 'Now, the question is, who shall be asked to meet them?'

'The Wynwards are friends of theirs, are they not?' I asked. I had dropped stitches—and there was nothing to be done but to pull out the four needles, unravel, and pick up the lot. 'I like Mrs Wynward very much.'

'Do you? It shows your good taste, she is a nice, sensible little person,' he said. 'Wynward is a bit slow—but none the worse for that! That makes four. We have those large guest-rooms. Then there is the bachelor's room. I should like to ask Wilmot. He was my best man, you know!'

My heart simply jumped up into my mouth. 'What? You want *him*?' I stammered.

'Do you object? You really mustn't indulge in fancies, my dear! I feared you had taken a dislike to poor old Wilmot, and really he is one of the best fellows alive!'

'Oh, I don't mind, of course! He will not be *my* guest, so it can't make any difference to me one way or the other. Only—won't he be rather the fifth wheel of the coach? We should be three couples without him. My heart beat fast with a sort of sudden anxiety. I did not feel as if I could look that big, kind man in the face now. Why? I wonder.

'Well! You don't suppose we are going about in couples, you and me, Flo and Reg, and Daisy Wynward and her old stick of a husband, do you? I never met any one with such out-of-the-way notions about things as you have! One would think you had been brought up among wild Indians, or gipsies, or something!' His voice sounded cross. It did me good. The funny, shamed, miserable sort of feeling passed and went. I was up in arms.

I flashed my eyes at him in a way that always makes him more civil for a few hours.

'It was for your friend's sake I said that,' I commented. 'I don't see what attraction there is here for any man about town—who will miss his clubs and things—that is all.'

What had I said that was funny? He *roared*. When he had got over the paroxysm, in which I did not join, but with a dignified air went steadily on with my knitting, he said, 'Excuse me, child, but I could not help it! Fancy old Wilmot a "man about town"! It is too rich. I must tell Regy. If I do while he is eating, he will choke—he must choke!'

'How kind of you!' I placidly remarked. 'But it is not so very extraordinary that I should think Captain Wilmot a "man about town" considering that he is

your chief bachelor friend, and you were a club man, and all that.'

'He is a club man safe enough, but affects only the grim old places we younger ones who don't want to die of dullness give a wide berth to,' he said. 'But, you call him a bachelor.' (Then he reminded me of the marriage story.) 'We all considered him hopelessly celibate, he was never known to look at a woman in any way except as a necessary evil invented by the Powers that be—and when he got married we simultaneously remarked that the woman must have proposed to him.'

'Did she?'

'Not she! She was the most nervous, shy, apologetic kind of creature. No! She was rather pretty—but there is not much doubt as to the reason he married her. Her father was the clergyman of the village—his father had a small property, you know, including the gift of the living on his land. This rector, or vicar, or whatever he was, died suddenly one day, and did not leave a *sou* for the widow and kids—seven, I think there were, and five much younger than the two eldest—both girls. The eldest went to be a governess, but the second was too delicate to work for her living. He married her.'

'How like him!' I cried. 'Just what I should have expected of him!' Only when I saw Henry—he had taken his cigar from his lips and was staring at me in utter amazement did I realise that I had been stupid.

'My—word! More surprises!' he mockingly said. 'When are they coming to an end? How do you know, madam, what Wilmot would do in such a case? I

can't have you totting up other men at first sight as you did me—understand that !'

But—for once I was glad that my husband is shallow, and no impression lasts long with him. He chaffed me a bit, then made what he called 'one of his inspired suggestions.'

'I know the poor old chap—he is older than I am by a year or two—would be much more comfortable with a home of his own,' he went on, 'instead of letting that outlandish place of his in the west once in a blue moon, and living in chambers in town. Suppose we found him a wife?'

'What do you mean?' I asked. 'I know nobody. There were no girls about us of my own age, and Flo and Bellona's friends have all managed to get married. I positively don't know of one single girl I could ask! *You* do? She wouldn't come, not knowing me personally.'

'Oh yes, she will,' he tauntingly said, stretching out his legs and sticking them across a garden-chair, as he looked at me through his half-closed eyelids. 'And a jolly good match she will be for old Wilmot. I mean little Blanche Westerfield, Daisy Wynward's younger sister, who came out at the last court. She is a silly sort of a thing—not half the *nous* of her sister—but Wilmot's the kind of chap who likes a brainless sort of idiot for a wife. Then she has green eyes and red hair. She will make things hum, and keep him amused. Has she any money? A tidy bit—old Westerfield came down handsomely when Daisy married Leo Wynward—he couldn't well have married otherwise, with only his younger son's allowance,

and I have heard that the three girls will share alike.'

'Perhaps Captain Wilmot will not oblige you, and fall in love with her,' I said resignedly, rolling up my knitting and sticking it in my knitting-basket (Frau Rasch's gift), for the sunset had faded, it was getting too dark to see.

'That's not my business,' he returned. 'He saw my neck safely into the halter, I can't do less for him than to provide him a halter for his own. You write to Daisy and ask her to bring that sister of hers to help her liven us up—and tell Flo when you write—then there won't be any nonsense about not bringing Regy. I must have Reg to enjoy the jokes with me.'

I felt angry. His superior wisdom was sickening. 'Why will she bring Regy if she hears that girl is likely to come?' I asked, with some warmth.

'If you can't understand, you are denser than I thought,' he exclaimed impatiently. 'You know very well they are bored to death with each other. She doesn't want him following her about, Write those letters to-night, there's a good girl—I will let you have your own way in other things as a return—at least, for the present—and don't forget to mention that we can put up any number of motor-cars and chauffeurs. I had a room arranged for those gentry, who turn up their noses at domestic servants—I knew we should want it before long.'

'We can't give Flo rooms to herself,' I grudgingly said.

'No! I'll have a look round to-morrow and plan the turtledoves' cages,' he said.

It was a bribe—that—that he would let me have my own way for a little if I did what he asked: so I went into the smaller drawing-room which is by courtesy called my boudoir—I haven't cottoned to the room at all, and only use it for letter-writing—and switching on light, sat down and wrote off as I was bid.

Presently, when I had nearly finished, he came sauntering in, and taking up the letters, read them, one by one. 'They will do—though they will make them smile—you haven't dropped the schoolgirl yet,' he said, 'But where is Wilmot's?'

'Oh! I am not—surely—to write to *him*?' I stammered, all the blood rushing to my face. Fancy—my inviting him—after that episode! I felt unequal to place myself in such a vile position.

'What nonsense I' he exclaimed. 'I am not going to indulge you in such rotten rubbish. It is the proper thing for the lady of the house to write invitations to her staying guests. You don't know what to say? I will tell you.'

And there and then he dictated a letter—fortunately, a short one, stating that it would give us real pleasure if Captain Wilmot would join our house-party, a small one, consisting in all probability of Flo and Reg, and one or two others who were at the wedding. And although I felt desperately uncomfortable about it, that letter went into the post-bag with the rest. I dreamt that night that I went down into the hall, having fished out the key from one of Henry's pockets, took out that letter, and burnt it. But, when morning came—and the post-bag had gone beyond recovery—'behold it was a dream!'

In a couple of days the replies came.

Flo's was stiff, distant. No one would have dreamt she was writing to a *sister*. She was 'feeling horribly run down,' and nothing would tempt her to 'bury herself in the country for a day' did she not feel that in refusing my first invitation to her she would be neglecting a duty: and she was my 'affectionate sister, Flo.' Not a word from Regy, or to Henry. They might neither of them have existed.

What a contrast was Mrs Wynward's letter! She wrote with warmth—a big, scrawly handwriting, but it gave me—I was feeling rather lonely and scared just then—a sense of homeliness and comfort.

'We are both most flattered to be asked to see you so soon, and have at once put off all engagements which would have interfered with our visit to you,' she wrote. 'We have been thinking and talking of you so much, and I quite *long* to hear your accounts of your first visit to the Continent. As for Blanche, she is in the seventh heaven of delight at the idea of accompanying us. It is most *good* of you and our old friend Henry to ask her!' *et cetera, et cetera.*

But, when Henry wondered 'why she gushed,' and said nasty things about her 'making a dead set at me,' I was too angry to speak. For the first time I *sulked*.

I *know* she is genuine—her letter is genuine—for she knew more than I knew of what was before me. Did she not give me real, sound advice? She dared not say more than she did say, I know that! And all—all is dictated by a *great, true feeling of pity*.

There was one more letter. I knew it, at once!

That great, stiff handwriting—it was just what I should have expected.

It was short, but to the point.

‘LONDON, *July —th.*

‘DEAR MRS DELINCOURT,—‘I had accepted an engagement which would take me to the extreme west of England in a few days, but I am postponing it to avail myself of your and Delincourt’s kind invitation for the 13th. I may have to shorten my visit, and I hope you will excuse this—but I will endeavour to be punctual on the day, and I am,

‘Very faithfully yours,

‘DRED WILMOT.’

‘PS.—I will bring my new motor-car, but I am my own chauffeur.’

## XI

MAYBURY TOWERS, *July —th.*—I am my own property again, just for a little while! I summoned up courage to ask Henry to save me from being chaffed to death by Flo, by occupying the room next mine—it was supposed to be my dressing-room, his is beyond it—just while she is here. I expected *squalls*. But he acquiesced, saying he didn't mind, for I was such a little silly I couldn't 'take chaff' and he didn't want me to be too upset to play the hostess properly.

'There was one great fault in your bringing-up, all three of you,' he went on. 'You hadn't a brother! If you had had one, you would have known a little about men instead of being such utter ignoramuses that you are always butting your heads against a stone wall, as it were.'

'I am sure Bellona manages every man she comes across—Snuffles is her slave—and she even succeeded in managing you!' I cried.

'I will thank you not to compare me with that old noodle,' he said, and went out in a huff. But I had got rid of him for a little bit, and I could have danced with delight!

Now that I go to my room at night alone (I lock the door between us, but he has not tried it yet) I am able to post up my Diary. I really couldn't in the daytime, there is such a tremendous lot to do. People call the country 'quiet,' 'wonder what I find to do'—why,

every one seems hunting and pestering me all day long—it is quite a relief when we are out driving. Mrs Martin is a good old soul, but she has not been house-keeper in what she calls 'an 'igh fambly' before—only cook—and she comes to me at every tiff and turn, expecting *me* to know what ought to be done with this and that—telling me the maids object to the chauffeurs having meals by themselves, and Ponting, the nice young *chef*, is sulking because there are so many different meals to serve. (I settled *that*. I sent for Ponting, and was very sweet, promising him a scarf-pin after they had all gone if he manages without further help. He blushed and wriggled and grinned and went off in high feather. I only hope he does not think I am cherishing a secret passion for him—he has a heap of dirty, paper-covered novels in his room near the kitchens.)

This sort of thing has prevented me from writing before. To-night I am very wakeful. . . . I have got out of bed, tired with twisting and turning and thinking of sheep going through a gate, or counting backwards—and am sitting at my desk with one shaded lamp. The moonlight is streaming in—it seems to lie dreaming on the floor in the extraordinary stillness. Ah! Just as I wrote that, an owl hooted in the shrubbery. I got up to see if one would fly across—swift, silent, ghostlike—and for some moments remained looking out.

How beautiful it was—the Italian garden in the white light—the urns and statues and temples *poetised*. The perfume of roses and the border of tobacco plants came up and seemed to embrace me—the false, acted

embraces of my husband when he was playing the lover seemed to return and mock me—I came away, and sat down again, *stung* by those memories.

• • • • •  
What a day that was, when they arrived!

They were all motoring and 'would arrive as soon as they could after luncheon.' Henry took it into his head to motor to meet them at a place about twenty miles off, where he has a farm. There is a lovely garden there, seemingly, and the *fermière* is young and pretty, and when he went over gave him tea in the garden and offered to get it for any number at any time—so he will give them tea there. I refused to go—how could I go? There were scores of things to see to at the last—and when I expected Juliette to arrange flowers in the rooms she actually flounced out of the room in a rage. She was all penitence next day, but it was uncomfortable. The girl is getting spoilt. She dresses up and, I am nearly certain, *paints*. I expect she is 'setting her cap' at some one—perhaps Ponting—but when I suggested this to Martin she pursed up her lips, shook her head and said, 'the minx was aiming 'igher than that,' so I suppose she has her eye on one of the chauffeurs—both badly made, sickly looking men, but supposedly better class fellows 'down on their luck.'

After I had, I thought, seen to everything, picked out appropriate books for the bookcases, and chosen the linen for the various beds and dressing-rooms, I went out and took a good-natured under-gardener about with baskets and a wheelbarrow. (I know the head-gardener wants to send up everything, fruit,

flowers, vegetables, just as it suits him, and smiles sourly at me as if I were a lunatic who must be humoured when I will be on my own.') The blossoms were simply a mass of loveliness when they were all about me in the stillroom upstairs, and the stillroom maid (a good-natured thing with fat red cheeks and awfully bad teeth) was fetching and carrying the vases.

I found I had barely enough material to decorate the rooms to advantage—and when I had finished the married couples' and the girl Blanche Westerfield's rooms I had only a few sprays of Marylilies and oak fern left. Then that girl suggested they would look beautiful on the writing-table in the oak-room—and I saw that her suggestion was a good one—so I took a very graceful, fragile, tall vase with a glass base and arranged them in it—then, telling Willsmer I should not want her any more at present, I carried it myself to the bachelor's room chosen for Captain Wilmot.

This is exactly over mine, and I consider it a *sweet* room. Green walls—oak floor with green carpeting—a few proof engravings about—dark oak furniture (*really* old)—white hangings—white bed—bookcase full of volumes such as men care to read—history, travels, sport, and sporting and funny novels—and a writing-table before the big couch near the long, low window.

My Marylilies certainly looked perfect in contrast with all the browns and greens—and I sat down and looked at them and thought—and thought—till the tears came into my eyes. For I seemed back again in the time just before my wedding—and at it, when

I carried a sheaf of lilies just like those. . . . I remembered so well that little scene in the library when Captain Wilmot made me pin on his favour, how I laid aside my flowers, and he gave them back to me after he had kissed my hand with such a dear, grave, earnest look in his violet eyes. . . . Then, I remembered the day before, when I went down in my wedding-frock, and thinking the man asleep in the porter's chair in the billiard-room must be Henry, kissed him on the forehead, in his sleep—

I was just as far, in my 'brown study,' as the moment when the big giant sat up, staring, and saying 'My God—my dream—' in that strange, choked voice, when I hear one of our men-servants outside. What was he saying? 'This is your room, sir—I expect your man will be up directly, he is coming with the luggage.' Then a male voice I seemed to know said, 'Thanks, very much!' and some one strode in—looked all about—a big, tall man.

'Oh! Mrs Delincourt! I beg your pardon—'

It was Captain Wilmot, who looked aghast—peculiar—until, after the first feeling of horror, I jumped up and with a violent effort became myself—'all there.'

'I did not expect you quite so soon,' I said, stretching out my hand, which he grasped so tightly I could have squealed. 'You must excuse my—what do you call it?—fatigue-duty costume! I am doing 'fatigue' work to-day—going round all the rooms and seeing to things. I was just thinking of removing these lilies—they were my stillroom-maids' suggestion. Shall I?'

'Oh—*please* not'—he dropped my hand, gave me a queer look, then gazed at the lilies with a sad little smile. 'They are—my favourite flowers. I went some miles out of my way to-day to put a wreath of them on a grave. . . . But I mustn't speak of graves to you, just beginning life, full of life and vigour. And Henry? How is he? Well? I'm glad. They told me he had motored to meet your guests. I expect I should have happened upon them but for this going out of my way—'

He stopped short; there was a knock at the door. Before I had given myself time to think I cried 'Come in,' and some one *did* come in—a tall, slim man, who retreated with round eyes and open mouth, as if I had been a mad bull or something.

'Come in, Brown,' called out Captain Wilmot, evidently annoyed; so it was, of course, his valet. How I got out of the room I could not tell if I were to be severely punished, or put on the rack even. One can't do impossibilities. And it is absolutely impossible for me to recollect in what words I asked him to expect me in the drawing-room in half an hour—I would take him round the garden. The first distinct item in my memory is that I was dressing myself properly, in a white frock which fastened in front, without Juliette. She had been so odd and jerky that morning that I liked her 'room better than her company,' as my old nurse used to express it in the long ago which now seems like a vague dream.

That horrid little incident, his finding me in his room in what was nothing more or less than a white morning-wrapper which I had put on to do the flowers

in, had made me what the maids used to call 'all of a tremble.' My hands shook so much that I could hardly button buttons and hook hooks into eyes. I thought I never should get dressed, and I was afraid Juliette might descend upon me at any moment and see that I was nervous and funny—but at last I was ready. I looked awfully schoolgirlish in my white frock with a blue sash tied behind (I tied it in front and wriggled it round, so that it was rather baggy). But, somehow, I felt that that dear man is so kind he would like me all the better for looking young and pitiful. (I can see that my eyes have a pitiful look in them, most times, now.)

Just as I was ready and going downstairs, the gong sounded, and our butler, Jenkins, met me at the foot of the stairs, full of apologetic explanation, which ended up in 'the Capting wouldn't take nothink but tea, ma'am, so I have served tea as usual in the drawing-room.'

Going in, I saw him gazing out at the gardens through one of the long windows. He turned as he heard the door open.

'What a lovely place you have here, to be sure I' he said in a half-regretful tone—or so I fancied—as he took a low chair opposite to mine. I sat down at once before the tea-table, determined not to be silly and nervous—though it was perfectly awful to be *tête-à-tête* with him after my two escapades—the day before my wedding and to-day.

'Do you think so?' I returned, before I asked him whether he took cream, or sugar, or both. 'Somehow, it seems to me like a lot of other places

—those we see photographed in newspapers, you know !'

'It is rather like one place I have seen, Danebury Abbey,' he said, as he took some muffin and munched. (What I like immensely about him is his perfect *ease*. He ate, and tried to persuade me to eat, as if he had known me ages and ages and had some sort of right to look after me.) 'I fancy you met Lord Danebury, did you not, at Skye Castle? Within the last few days I have heard he is going to be married again—to a cousin of mine—a lady past her first youth.'

'I am sure a cousin of yours would suit him admirably,' I said. 'You ask why? Oh! Because—well, you are very serious—religious even—aren't you?'

'Not religious—as your father looks at religion, I fear!' he returned, smiling. 'At least, when I was very small indeed I kicked against dogma. Before I went to school I had come to the conclusion that no human creature could imagine the Deity, so it was best not to try to.'

'Oh, how I wish my father had been like that!' I cried. 'He seems to think that goodness means exact "attention to the rubric" and having banners and vestments as they had in "the early English Church." He leaves a lot of big things unattended to because of those little trifles.'

'I thought as much,' he returned, looking amused. 'I suppose I ought not to tell you, but poor Sir Eustace was in a dreadful state of mind at your wedding because he fancied there was some irregularity in the proceedings which might amount to illegality. . . .'

'What?' I interrupted. (Heavens! If only . . .)

'Pray don't be alarmed,' he said, mistaking my ecstasy for fear. 'He procured all sorts of opinions, and even, I believe, applied personally to the Archbishop of Canterbury. The knot was securely tied.'

'Shall we go out—or would you like some more tea?' I asked. Somehow, that sentence about the knot being securely tied had stabbed me to the quick, mentally and morally speaking. It was a relief to be out in the sweet summer air. He seemed anxious about my not wearing a hat, so to satisfy him I fetched a big, green-lined umbrella and struggled with it. Some mischievous spirit seemed suddenly to possess me! I pretended I could not manage it at all. I didn't want the stupid thing! I never do bother about my head being covered, except when it must be, at afternoon calls and in church. 'If I have to use this, you will have to hold it for me—it is much too heavy for me—I sprained my wrist a little the other day,' I said, expecting that he would recoil in horror.

To my surprise, he said, 'I will hold it over you with pleasure!' and presently any one curious enough to watch us from some window would have seen me proceeding along the garden delightfully shaded by this new knight of dames. I lingered at various spots where there was something to look at in the way of a rare shrub or plant. I had to endure this interview with a man I was liking better and better every minute until the motor-cars rushed up with my house-party. I would rather be out of doors with him, I felt less self-conscious, so I eked out the various objects I had to show him, and even took him to the tennis-lawn and had a 'single' till he declared I looked tired, when we

left by a little gate and I took him to a comfortable garden-seat under a weeping willow by the little stream which runs through the fields and by and by becomes the river Rake.

It was a pleasant, homelike spot—and had the special charm, for me, of my having been here, alone—I doubt whether my lord and master knows of its existence.

‘I am afraid you are tired, and hot,’ he said—and I felt his eyes looking me over as I leant back with a little sigh of relief and content. It was so sweet, so comforting, to feel myself alone with a *real* friend—and somehow I *knew* this man was one.

‘I am hot—but only pleasantly so—but *tired*? Tired is not the word for what I feel!’ I said; it came from me involuntarily—it had been pent up so long, ever since I was awakened to the fact that the Henry I married was not the Henry I loved, that I am sure I was not responsible. ‘I am tired of everything—of getting up in the morning and going through the weary round to going to bed at night—I am tired of eating, sleeping, talking—I am most tired to death of *living*!’

He was silent for so many moments that at last, fearing I had utterly shocked him, I felt disgusted (thinking that he was only like the rest of them) and sprang up to rush away, when he placed that big, powerful hand on my arm, and drew me down by him.

‘You are the child you were—the child I believe you will be to the last hour of your life—and you must listen to one who is years and years—I really feel as if it was a century—older than you,’ he said in a grave,

but tender voice. 'Remember—you asked me to be your friend when we said good-bye after the wedding—'

'And you said you would be—till death,' I answered, looking up into his face—then quickly away again—for he was looking at me sadly, but as lovingly as if he really cared for me, which, of course, is out of the question. But what god-like pity and compassion the man has !

'I did,' he went on, 'and I meant it, and now I am going to avail myself of my privilege. My dear girl, you are suffering from a purely physical depression, and ought to see a doctor, at once !'

'Thank you for nothing !' I cried, although there was a choke in my throat, I nearly sobbed. 'It is my soul which is ill—my poor, deceived soul ! I loved—an imaginary being—and I married—the man who masqueraded as a lover—an ideal lover. So I feel as if I were not married at all—as if every moment that I am Henry's wife I am outraging myself and every other woman besides !'

He took my hands in his and talked to me as if he had been my brother. He said I was of the romantic imaginative temperament which exaggerated and distorted facts. He trotted out that worn-out, threadbare argument—would Henry have taken the trouble to assume the character which would charm and woo me unless he was seriously in earnest?

'As for this lightsome chaff and banter which you complain of, I assure you it is the way young people of the better classes negotiate their life,' he said. 'They have a certain amount of right on their side, for their immunity from work, the obligation to pass their time

fighting against the deadly dullness of no fixed occupation, renders it imperative that they should treat their lives from a humorous point of view. Even your sister, Lady Wendell, does this—and I expect that Henry's experience of her and Regy led him to imagine you would shed your schoolroom skin and show yourself the same !'

I groaned. All seemed to come upon me at once—my bitter disappointment in Henry—the fact that I was to be the entertainer of a lot of flippant people who 'chaffed' through life—impertinent chaff, for the most part—and everything. I was really plunged in despair. But he influenced me, somehow. He actually asked me as a great personal favour to him—my friend—to be a 'valiant woman.' He promised me, that if I tried to fall in with the spirit of my coming house-party, to be my 'bright, sweet young self,' I should feel differently about everything presently. Then he touched my vanity. 'I am quite sure you do not want anecdotes told about you in Society as an absurd social failure !' he said. Remembering the potent effect this suggestion had upon me makes me feel disgusted with myself. I imagined Flo and Regy relating me as a 'good joke.' There and then I roused all my drooping energies—and looking him full in the face, thanked him for his advice, and said, 'You shall be proud of your pupil—your protégée, Captain Wilmot !'

Even as we lounged back to the house, and he began telling me interesting anecdotes of his campaigns (do what I would, I could not bring him to the incidents

which won him his D.S.O. and things), I felt more cheerful and commonplace. (A good thing I did I for my lord and master was in a most objectionably bad temper.) As we came in sight of the house we saw two ladies and two men sitting out on the big lawn, beyond the yew peacocks and teapots—*all* smoking! They were Lionel and Mrs Wynward, a pretty-looking girl with blazing red-gold hair, and my tyrant.

Daisy Wynward jumped up and ran towards me in her girlish way, kissing me on both cheeks, nodding familiarly to Captain Wilmot, then linked her arm in mine and called 'Blanche!' Blanche looks *nice*. I don't believe she is like the woman with red hair Henry has told me about. She looks just a bright, simple child, ready to enjoy everything as it comes and to take it as it comes.

'Oh, we had a most lovely time—it was such a surprise to meet Harry—so sweet of him to arrange tea at that duck of a farmhouse—such a dear creature, that farmer's wife—*why* didn't you bring Captain Wilmot to meet us? We heard he came quite early in the afternoon—' (This was Daisy's prattle.)

'I never thought of such a thing, or I might have done,' I said, wondering whether it was my *not* having the idea which made Henry look so cross. But no! He seemed to brighten up a little as he paced the grass, backwards and forwards, with his 'best man,' talking rather seriously about things. As I tried to have some sort of conversation with that long-faced, stupid-looking Lionel (he has lack-lustre eyes and a drooping

under-lip which is always moist, like a dribbling baby's), Daisy was wondering why Flo and Regy hadn't appeared.

'Harry quite expected them, and was very put about that they didn't appear,' she added in an undertone. (She *will* call him 'Harry.' They all do. I *won't*.) 'I hope they have not had a scrap, and are both sulking.'

I hope they are not. For the frown deepens on my lord and master's brow, and as I dressed (Juliette has quite recovered her spirits) I heard him growling and grumbling to his unfortunate valet, although the door is shut between us.

Dinner was announced—we all filed in in couples—Henry and Mrs Wynward, Captain Wilmot and Blanche, myself and that oaf Lionel. If Daisy Wynward hadn't chattered incessantly to Henry, and Blanche talking like a parrot to Captain Wilmot, making him laugh under his breath (how *did* she do it?), it would have been dullness itself, for while Mr Wynward is eating, he is either deaf, or dense beyond calculation. His conversation consisted of 'Hey, *what?*' when I spoke. 'Ah. Um. Yes. Very good,' in an inane way, when he thought it was time to seem to understand.

We were just beginning dessert when I noticed a sort of flutter among the men-servants. Jenkins rushed out almost, and returning in a minute, slightly flushed, went up to Henry and whispered something. I saw Henry's face change—he jumped up.

'They have arrived—shall I bring them in?—or entertain them in the breakfast-room? They must be

starved!' he said, looking around—but not at me! At that moment I knew I was 'a cipher.'

They all clamoured for them to be brought in. 'I have not seen dear Flo since before her illness,' cried Daisy. 'Oh, Harry, do bring her in. It is so bad for any one just recovered from "flu" to go long without food. . . .'

Every one seemed to talk at once. Jenkins was quite excited, talking to Ponting through the tube by the lift. 'What does Ponting say?' I asked him, when he corked it up, and the colloquy was over.

He came to me. 'The Colonel gave orders before dinner for a dinner to be kept ready to be served at any minute for his Lordship and her Ladyship, ma'am,' he said in a tone half-respectful, half-condescending. (I do *wish* Henry would not give orders without telling me, I am certain it lowers me in the estimation of the servants! Then he 'stood at attention,' for the door was flung open and Henry came in with Flo on his arm and Regy in the rear.

She had only taken off her light cloak. She was in a glistening dress of palest pink, with a huge green hat piled high with roses. With her pale face—I never remember Flo so pale—and her lips a kind of rose-red, I thought her lovelier than ever. A sort of rush of admiration made me jump up and go to her. I mumbled a lot of things—called her 'darling'—hoped she wasn't tired—but she only gave me a dazed kind of look, as if she were in a trance, and just held her cheek to be kissed—it was deadly cold. Then Regy called out, 'Hallo, old lady!—mustn't call you old girl now, eh? How are you getting on?' and gave me

a rough hug which felt real and comfortable, somehow. Then he made me laugh at an old joke we used to have which showed me he was the old original Regy. Then they—Reg and Flo—were seated side by side eating their dinner while we all looked on—at least, *he* did. She only played with the food on her plate, and drank champagne.

It seemed that the delay in their arrival was caused by her having a fainting fit just as they were starting.

'She has been kicking up in that way ever since that attack,' said Regy. '(Oh! Don't pinch and glare at me, my lady! You know you have!) The doctor says she is overstrung, or over-reached, or something. Wants country air "and sich." I was jolly glad when you and Harry suggested coming. Nell! I give her into your hands, to be cosseted and nursed up—'

'Don't be so absolutely ridiculous, and remember that I am ages and ages older than that child,' interrupted Flo. 'Nell knows something better than to forget that we never had anything to do with each other—when she was in the nursery I was in the school-room, and *vice versa*!'

'Flo, you didn't go back to the nursery, you were brought out and got married,' I hazarded. I resented the tone of her speech as well as her allusions to myself.

'Oh, perhaps I did not,' she languidly said, holding out her glass for Henry to cream in champagne. 'But, really, life gives the effect of one's always being punished—slapped, put in the corner, and bullied without a chance of having a look-in to retaliate.'

'I hope that is dry champagne, Henry,' I said. 'I do remember this much about you, Flo, that when

Isabel came of age and you drank her health in some "lady's champagne," as the Dad called it, you had a most awful bilious attack.'

'Come, come, this is not a consulting-room, Nell,' cried out Henry. 'Although our friend Wilmot did walk the hospital before the fancy seized him to "fight for his country," as the enthusiastic big-Englanders term it—any of you who want sound, amateur advice should consult him in private.'

Then there was a babel of small talk about Captain Wilmot's medical knowledge. He was bantered and badgered, *I* call it! But he didn't seem to mind. When Flo, begged by Henry, who seemed bent on fooling her with slavish adulation, to spend an hour, at least, in the drawing-room, rose and said she must really go to bed—though, of course, Regy was ready to join in anything that was going forward—my Mentor actually said, quite meekly, as if he hadn't been chaffed half out of his life. 'If I may venture to say so, Lady Wendell, that is the very best thing you can do.' I did admire him. . . .

I offered to escort her to her room—it was when we women were in the hall and the men were laughing and talking in the dining-room (one of the after-dinner stories Regy is famous for, I expect)—but she simply laughed, and chuckled me under the chin.

'You dear little fledgeling, I must give you some lessons on tact as soon as I am equal to it,' she said. 'Good night! Good night, Daisy—glad to see you here, and you too, little Blanche!' and after holding her face to us to kiss, one after the other, she sailed upstairs, stopping now and then to look at a picture.

'Shall we go into the drawing-room, dear?' asked Mrs Wynward. 'Or do you join the men in the billiard-room?'

I was so astonished that she at once told me all about the new fashions in country houses. 'You have an advanced Society dame to entertain in the person of your beautiful sister,' she said. 'And, really, it is a shame that you should not have been put in the way of the manners and customs of the hour by somebody in the know—for it is placing you at a disadvantage. We all know what men are! Their wives must be perfect, or they will "chuck them," as they call it.'

We had a long talk about Flo before we separated for the night. Mrs Wynward seems bent on praising her up to me. 'You may hear rumours about her as time goes on,' she said quite earnestly, for her (Blanche was flitting about the big drawing-room humming as she looked at everything with a young girl's interest), 'but you must not believe them. Flo may be frivolous, or may appear so—Society demands it of her—but she is far above the rest of fashionable dames.'

• • • • •

*Flo!* I can only add a few words to-night. I am perfectly sick. I pace up and down my room in the moonlight and grind my teeth and pray for patience. *Flo!* What is she doing? Is she punishing me for something? Is she trying to send me daft? Or—*did she love Henry, and does she love him still?*

## XII

MAYBURY TOWERS, *July —th.*—I sometimes wonder whether I shall not awaken one morning and find all this a dream. . . . I cannot understand why Henry married me if Flo was his liege lady, as he shows she is every moment of the day. *He* (Captain Wilmot) is turning rather sharp and short with me whenever we have a few words in private. He tells me I am 'not doing him credit.' And when I felt very down and begged him to tell me what he meant, he said it was unworthy of me to show a schoolgirl jealousy of my sister: that very likely it was not much of a feeling—I knew best about that—but that I behaved as if I resented every attention any one paid her, and that if he judged my conjugal affection for Henry by my ways and manners, he would think very poorly of it indeed.

At that point I 'lost my temper.' I flared up.

'Henry does not want my "conjugal affection," as you call it,' I cried—we were lingering in the fruit garden after the others had gone out, and I knew I could not be overheard. 'He has—Flo! I know now that what some one hinted to me is actually a fact—that he married me because I was her sister, and like her—and she herself was an impossibility.'

He turned and gave me an awful look. Then, I *did* 'get it hot!—to use a vulgar expression. He said I was sinning in the most loathsome manner—at least

in a manner indescribably loathsome to him. I was judging my fellow-creatures—and above and beyond all—my own sister and the husband I had vowed to love and honour, *et cetera*.

I believe I got a little light-headed, for I laughed. I felt mad. To be scolded by him seemed to *scorch* and *burn* me.

'Have you finished?' I asked, when he halted to take breath. 'Oh! You have! Now you shall hear my opinion of you! You are a prig, and a man of iron, and may be a splendid fighter, but you are utterly incapable of caring for any one but yourself! That is what I mean by a prig! A man who is so vain of his own perfection that he thinks of that and nothing else!'

I thought he would metaphorically 'turn upon and rend me.' We were at the end of a grass walk—I turned to go back and 'get my hiding,' as Regy calls it. He turned too, but walked by me in dead silence, for a time. Then he spoke in a sort of choked voice, which made me sorry at once.

'I think you are right, I am a prig! I never thought of it, to tell you the truth,' he began humbly. 'And—perhaps there is something in the nature of iron in me—for—I can—I do—get *red hot*!'

What was it? I, turning suddenly, astonished by his last words and the way he said them, looked up into his face, and started. I should not have known him—there was such an expression of passionate something or other. Oh, well! I can't describe it, all the more because when I remembered it I feel cold and hot and shivery and worried and *all anyhow*.

I begged his pardon, and I cried. He said he thought nothing of what I said in a fit of natural petulance, and a lot more that I forget. But instead of being 'red hot' any more he was simply *icy*. He was terribly polite. He talked as if he were talking to a queen, but all the time one felt he was on a pinnacle—something above all monarchs of this petty globe. I felt like an animated heap of sackcloth and ashes. In that humour I could have revelled in my Dad's Good Friday services in the chapel, where he remained lying before the altar in some black garment and his 'stocking-feet' for hours. One could see he thoroughly enjoyed it—people's backs are so expressive. And if I could have gone down full length on the grass-path and grovelled I felt I should enjoy it, I expect because I thought the ice would melt then and he would pick me up and grovel in spirit before *me*.

'What have you to say? I *must* ask your opinion,' he began suddenly—so suddenly that I jumped.

'Nothing, except two things I was thinking about while you were preaching at me,' I meekly said, with a choke-sob. 'One was that if I were a dog, I should lie down on my back and kick up at you! It means such a lot more than any one can say. The other is, that I don't see why you should keep on insisting that Henry cares for me.'

'I am certain he does—he can't help it,' he said, in his own voice this time.

'I would make a big bet, if I were a bettite, that if he was tested, you would be of my opinion, that he is so wildly absorbed in Flo that he has no eyes or ears for me or anything that happens to me,' I retorted.

'You propose to test him?' he asked. I could see he was uneasy.

'I soon would, if some one would behave to me and with me as he does with Flo!' I said. 'If only you would act a bit, and pretend to sit in my pocket, and dictate to me as if you had the right—in fact,' I went on, more courageously, 'if you were to act the Magnificent Mentor to me before them all as you do behind their backs, Henry, if he cares twopence about me, would at least notice it!'

'He would—resent it—very bitterly, I think!' he said thoughtfully.

'Well, we shall see, if you will do it,' I said. 'Of course, it will be only playing a little comedy. But I shall enjoy it, for one. . . . I do feel so lonely and neglected. . . .'

That shot told. Although I could see it went terribly against the grain with him, he agreed to act my faithful henchman before every one—'to boldly confess our friendship, risking all comments,' was how he put it. 'Not that it is not entirely repugnant to me to lower you to such a level,' he added scornfully, bitterly—a speech which let me into his *real* opinions of what Henry's conduct with Flo actually means!

\* \* \* \* \*

I am getting quite fond of these asterisks—they divide one subject from another so nicely. I will now recall three days which led up to the above conversation between me and my one and only Friend.

Flo had her breakfast sent up the morning after her arrival. Henry fidgeted fearfully about it—went up specially to ask, outside her door, what she could

eat,—wouldn't believe Regy—and when she said she could touch nothing but grilled oysters, seemed distracted when Ponting sent up word there wasn't an oyster in the house. He said there *must* and *should* be oysters. I ought to have seen to it that oysters were forthcoming. Regy roared with laughter, and told him he evidently didn't know Flo—she never asked for anything but impossibilities—he would soon settle her—and after disappearing for a few minutes while my other guests did all they could to lessen the absurdity of the situation, he came back and said, 'Oh, any bit of fish going, grilled, will do.'

My Lady came down about an hour later. She certainly looked young and lovely in the *sweetest* white embroidered muslin, and under a baby hat her pale face and pouting but pretty mouth made her look like a beautiful, cross baby-thing. She made no attempt to conceal the fact she was in a nasty temper. She sat down (we were all wandering about the hall, nobody agreeing to any way of passing the morning that I suggested), and nodding casually all round, made disparaging remarks about the country, and said it was 'woefully slow. There was literally nothing to do.'

'That is exactly the charm of the country, Lady Wendell,' said Captain Wilmot. 'One has to invent things to do. I have just persuaded your husband to have a run with me in my motor-car. I hope you do not object?'

'It wouldn't make much difference to him if I did,' said she disagreeably. She never looked at me. But when Henry approached her and (I could hear, my

ears are sharp) began to persuade her to allow him to escort her round the gardens and grounds, she melted. 'I don't mind,' she said—and in a few moments they went out into the sunshine—leaving me to entertain Mr and Mrs Wynward and Blanche.

They were really awfully good. They 'jumped' at my suggestion of motoring to the nearest town and seeing all there was to see—although I am perfectly certain that the only supposed objects of interest—a little collection of fossils and coins dug up about here in the old Town Hall, and the *stocks* (in good preservation)—would certainly not be objects of interest in *their* eyes.

When we came back I immediately asked for Henry and Flo.

'The Colonel and her Ladyship *was* here, ma'am, a few minutes back,' Jenkins informed me. 'But as I was passin' along the corridor I thought as I heard voices and them billiard-balls a-clickin' in the billiard-room.'

I went straight there and found Flo hard at it—leaning over the table in a graceful attitude, preparing for a shot, and Henry standing by the board, marking, and gazing at her as if he would eat her up.

'Hallo! You've run luncheon pretty close—don't interrupt—she's giving me a sound beating,' he said quite boastfully. So I stood quiet and watched Flo score twelve. The luncheon gong sounded just as Henry called out 'Fifty! I'm beaten by sixteen! You have improved since we last played together, old girl!'

Yes—it was *old girl*, and *unblushingly* said. Flo was quite her old self as we went in to luncheon; in fact, she was in high spirits. I found it difficult to keep up to the high-water mark of jollity which had set in. Jokes were flying about—good, bad, and indifferent: it reminded me of a game of battledore and shuttlecock. Even the two sober-sides, Captain Wilmot and Daisy Wynward's melancholy Jaques of a husband, failed to act as wet blankets. Laughter rippled about with each course, they ate and talked and drank all at once, it must really have sounded quite extraordinary outside the room—and when the men-servants retired to their dinners Regy and Henry fired off some jesting sentences which set the whole table in a roar. Even Captain Wilmot laughed, although he looked down at his fruit-plate and got very red.

In the afternoon we ladies went to our rooms 'to write letters' (which, interpreted, means, I find, to get into a loose wrapper and lie down with or without a novel, and with or without cigarettes). We met again, at tea-time, in floating gossamer tea-gowns which were really works of beauty and might have been garments competing for a prize, in the shade of the big cedar and horse-chestnuts on the big lawn beyond the clipped yew teapots and peacocks (which they all admire so much, but seem to *shun*).

Here I poured out tea, and Captain Wilmot and Regy fetched and carried, while Henry squatted on a camp-stool by Flo, who was stretched out languidly on a deck-chair, showing her remarkably pretty feet in silk stockings and white lace-over-satin shoes—and constituted himself a dumb-waiter. At least he held

Flo's cup and plate—but *dumb* he certainly wasn't—for he kept whispering in her ear—not only during tea, but afterwards, as she lay picking a rose to pieces. The sight of them positively fascinated me. She certainly looked lovely—her hair was down, in two big plaits. She had a rose-flush on her oval face, her long-lashed eyelids veiled her eyes—and as she picked off petal after petal, her taper fingers were objects of beauty.

'Flo is certainly lovely,' I said to Mrs Wynward, who was sitting by me.

'Quite a painter's study, really!' she replied.

'Yes. He might make a picture of it and call it "Flirtation,"' I returned drily.

'Hush, hush, my dear,' she murmured, in that patronising tone which is gall and wormwood to me, and which they all use to me more or less. 'Do be careful! Voices travel so—'

'If they do, I don't care,' I cried hardily.

'You will be wiser by-and-by—when you have been brought out, and have mixed freely in Society,' she went on, rather sympathetically. 'You will not take appearances of things for more than they are worth. We all of us act a part, you know! There would be no social intercourse if we did not. Look at Regy and my old man, for instance, sitting at Blanche's feet.' (Regy was actually doing so, squatting on the grass and hugging his white-covered knees; one who was not in the know might think they were quite *gone* on on her—instead of its being a sort of way of passing the time.)

(*Ah! . . .* I believe there are a great many

existent facts undreamt of in Daisy Wynward's comfortable philosophy !)

At dinner my popular sister (I find she *is that*) gave me the clue to her popularity. She came out, like a ship, in full fig. She was wearing a lovely, transparent, glittering sort of dress—tight to her exquisite figure, which is neither too plump or too thin—and, I believe, the Wendell family diamonds—or rather some of them. And as she glittered physically as she sat at Henry's right hand (there was a little contest between her and Daisy Wynward, Daisy persisting that not only because Flo is a peeress, but because she is a few months older, she is entitled to the place of honour at table), not only, I repeat, did her body glitter, but her mental part—that which talks. She can be both pathetic and humorous. I no longer wondered at Henry having married me because of my likeness to her and *being disappointed*.

I felt terribly 'down.' It was hard work trying to suggest amusements for my guests. Regy and Henry, then Henry and Captain Wilmot, played billiards that evening, and iced champagne and whiskies and sodas were the order of the night in the billiard-room. And that ended the first day.

The second, they went in a body, with servants and picnic-baskets, to a distant ruin, where there was a pinewood and a view, and lunched and tea'd there. I had a really horrid headache, and couldn't think, or worry, or anything, all day. I laid on my sofa, the room darkened. Juliette was really good. I can't think what is the matter with that girl—she has swollen eyes and puffy cheeks and seems in a state of

active despair. But she nursed me devotedly, made me a 'ptisane,' which really did me good—got the *chef* to brew me a real French bouillon—and bandaged my head, keeping the bandage cool with eau-de-cologne and menthol.

Towards late afternoon I slept. I was awakened by a kiss on my cheek. To my surprise, it was Flo! She looked awfully well, as she sat down by me and patted my hand.

'Poor little beastie, how is it?' she asked quite kindly. 'Better! That's right! Nothing like giving right up for a headache. One can't fight it out. How have I enjoyed myself? Oh! It was an awful bore, How you exist in the country I can't imagine! You won't after you have tasted town life. What did we do? Oh! Played hide-and-seek, like a parcel of idiots—then, after tea, which was smoky, sat in a ring and, pretending to be Australian squatters, played toss-ha'penny till Captain Wilmot sounded the bugle below for our return. You should have seen us scamper downhill like a lot of frightened rabbits! Why did Captain Wilmot sound the bugle? Oh! He wouldn't bite at the hide-and-seek bait—he was lazy, and sprawled in his motor-car, smoking and reading. You are coming to dinner? Not? Oh, you must! What would you do if there was a Court ball you were invited to after your presentation? You couldn't stop away for a headache! Practise "bucking up," my dear! That's my tip, and a good one—for from the moment you really "come out" till you are old enough to retire gracefully from Society, to "buck-up" must be the one thing you exist for!'

'But you were ill—laid up,' I ventured to suggest.

'That was quite another pair of sleeves! Society allows "the flu," now and then, and if one recovers, pats one on the back and forgets the offence. But minor matters such as bilious attacks and fainting fits and "such-like fooleries" are taboo. They are *bourgeois*, my child, hopelessly "no class"!'

That evening we musicked. While Flo sang and Blanche fiddled—she is quite a swell violinist—Daisy Wynward accompanied, and Captain Wilmot played chess with that ape Lionel. Henry, Regy, and I listened and smoked. (Yes—I have learned to smoke! It is indispensable, I find. I didn't like it at first—but most of those odd ways are—one gets accustomed to them in time.)

And that ended the second day.

It was the third which set me palpitating, on fire to a certain degree. . . .

It had been suggested, by Regy, that we should have a contest. We were to motor, in couples, after a chosen hare. It was, in fact, a game of motor hare-and-hounds. There was to be no limit in regard to locality or distance, and we were to be independent of each other in regard to refreshments, which we were to take with us.

We drew lots for the hare, and it came to Captain Wilmot, which pleased everybody. We all saw him off—alone in his little car—with huge bags of cut paper, prepared by the servants the night before. He was to have half an hour's *law*. Then we started. Henry and Flo in our small open car (I was not consulted, and the others took it as a matter of course), Lionel

Wynward and Blanche in another (with the Wynward's chauffeur), and Regy, Daisy Wynward, and myself in our Panhard.

It seemed to me that we went backwards and forwards, round and round, following those misleading bits of paper. There was no doubt about it that Captain Wilmot was a splendid hare. We never found him. It was settled that at six o'clock sharp we should all start for home. We arrived first—then the hare turned up—then Lionel Wynward and Blanche. It only wanted a quarter of an hour of dinner—eight o'clock—when I heard Henry's voice in the next room. *He* did not come in to speak to me, and I was too proud to seek him—so only at dinner did I hear his account of the delay. They had broken down—and had to put in to the garage in the nearest town and 'waive the chase,' as Henry called it. They spent their time in the old churchyard. Flo said, with a becoming little shudder, that she felt 'creepy.' It served her right if she did! For it was *not* nice for her to 'show off' when bridge was suggested, and the party was made up—Captain Wilmot and Regy, Daisy and Blanche. I had accepted an offer of Lionel Wynward's to play chess with him, not knowing enough of bridge to take a hand—and felt 'consterned' when I heard Flo say to Henry, 'Then you must give me a game of billiards—a hundred up.'

Surely, surely, I thought—he will not outrage me by piping the measure she chooses to dance! But he did. He made a face at us all—called out 'Needs must!' et cetera, and followed her out.

When we had all finished our games, they were still

there. Captain Wilmot went after them—then we all followed. Flo had beaten Henry again. She was flushed, beautiful, triumphant. . . .

Thus ended the third day, which led to that plain speaking of mine to Captain Wilmot. Nothing has happened since then. . . . I am trying to conquer and regulate myself—my misgivings, my emotions—all !

## XIII

MAYBURY TOWERS, *July* —*th.*—What will happen *next?* . . .

I am trying to look on at my experiences as if they were happening to some one else, being as amiable and contented as I can, according to my Mentor's advice. But it is hard work! I could not do it if he did not carry out his part of the bargain so well. He is devoted to me before them all, 'waits on me hand and foot.' At first it made me shy and nervous. But not one of them seemed to notice it. The drawback to *me* is, that he shuns me in private—or rather, avoids any *tête-à-tête*. I thought, for a few days, that it was accidental, but I am *sure*, now, it is not! As I would rather have one hour's talk with him alone than all his attention before everybody else I regret the change.

Meanwhile, my thoughts have been distracted by some queer happenings.

A day or two after my agreement with Captain Wilmot, Juliette came to me, looking like a tigress. She pulled my hair so while she was dressing me for dinner that I was obliged to remark upon her bad temper. Then it came out. She had quarrelled with Flo's maid (an Englishwoman, but not a pleasant-looking person at all) ever since their arrival.

'She is *méchante*, madame, and says *les choses* perfectly *shockeenge*,' she said, in the mixture of French and English she uses when 'put out,' which of late has been

the rule. After a lot of trouble I got it out of her. She resents Dingwall saying that Henry is so devoted to Flo that he would like to be her doormat, and relating how, before we were engaged, he practically *lived* at the Wendells'. 'She makes out that it was one *établissement à trois*, madame ! and dare to say that Madame is Madame Delincourt because Monsieur 'ad one great *querelle* with Miladi—she mean to say Monsieur marry you, madame, not for *amour*, but *dépit* !'

Somehow, I did not feel half crushed, as I might have done but a few weeks ago. Is my lack of emotion belief in Captain Wilmot's opinions—which are also to some extent Daisy Wynward's? These are, that the two are 'pals,' suit each other as playmates—nothing more. I think Juliette was absolutely astounded at the way I took her extraordinary talk. I merely laughed, and told her to take no notice—Dingwall would soon be leaving the Towers.

'Servants will gossip as long as they have no better amusements found for them, Juliette,' I said. 'But gossip never hurt anyone. If it did, we should all be dead'—I was going to quote Regy, 'dead and damned,' but stopped myself in time.

'But, Madame—*si bonne*—to 'ave 'er reputation murdered by such *canaille*.' She literally foamed at the mouth as she punished the brush with a violent assault of the comb, as if it were Dingwall's head.

'My reputation will take care of itself, Juliette,' I said, lecturing her on taking part in mean gossip, à la Captain Wilmot. Then I went downstairs, fancying he might be there. But he had already begun the

habit of postponing his appearance before meals to the very last moment.

Did I do right? I gave Flo a hint that Dingwall could *talk*, and *did* talk. She turned very red, and said she should give her notice as soon as she got her safe back in London. But I think she spoke to Dingwall, and that Dingwall and Juliette had a serious scrap—for otherwise I could not explain a funny incident.

I had sat up into the small hours, writing my Diary, and was so dog-tired that I fell fast asleep as soon as I was in bed—only waking suddenly in the gray dawn by hearing the dogs barking violently in the hall.

Burglars at last, I thought. . . . I got up, put on some clothes, and as quietly as possible unlocked the door between my room and my dressing-room, where Henry sleeps. But it was bolted on the other side. This nettled me a little—protecting himself from *me* indeed! I knocked—and knocked—then, getting no answer, went out into the passage. I was about to try the outer door when I saw it was open. I went in.

He had evidently been roused by the dogs, and had jumped up and gone down. . . . I was peeping over the balustrade, feeling frightened, for the dogs kept on—when he suddenly appeared from the back staircase, which is divided from the vestibule by two doors—and stood staring at me as if petrified.

'What is it?' I asked, bewildered. 'Are there burglars? Did the dogs frighten them away?'

'Oh, damn the dogs! What are you doing out here? Why didn't *you* go up and see to the things?'

'Up?' I helplessly asked. 'Where? Why? Burglars wouldn't be upstairs—'

He seemed to swallow down his evident wrath, and explained that he was awakened by shrieking overhead, which had evidently set the dogs barking below—and that he rushed upstairs, thinking I must certainly have heard, and it might be me. . . . 'It was your precious French maid, in screaming hysterics,' he said, 'and that hussy of Flo's was abusing her like a pickpocket. I say they must clear out by breakfast-time. I have told them to pack and be off!'

'But—Henry—you can't do that with Flo's maid,' I said. 'And really, I cannot see that Juliette need take any notice from *you*. What would you say if I gave notice to Ward?' (Henry's valet—I can't bear him. I know he is two-faced.)

'Oh—damn!' he cried; 'manage the whole boiling yourself—I'm out of it!' and with that he went into his room and shut and locked the door.

I felt one slight sensation of contempt, then asked myself what I had better do—deciding, after half a minute's thought, that my duty was to do what he had told me so vulgarly, 'manage the whole boiling' myself.

So I went upstairs, and met Dingwall wrapped in a shawl, her hair in curling-pins. She looked aghast, stood still, her back against the wall, and opened her mouth.

'How is poor Juliette?' I asked. 'I must go and see what I can do for her.'

'Oh—my lady, I mean ma'am, don't lower yourself by troubling about that wretched, bad girl!' she stammered—and there was a vindictive gleam in her eyes

—which did not match—that determined me not to attach the slightest importance to anything she said. 'She's a bit of foreign rotten rubbish as ain't fit to be in any respectable English 'ouse, let alone among ladies such as you and her Ladyship, as oughtent so much as touch her with the tongs!'

'You must not judge a French girl away from her friends and her country so harshly, Dingwall,' I said. 'She told me that you and she did not get on—but I hope you will at least agree to differ until you leave here with Lord and Lady Wendell a few days from this, when you go on, I believe, to the Duchess, my sister, at Skye Castle.'

'The Colonel said as both me and that girl was to be out of the 'ouse before the dressing-gong went, ma'am.'

I smiled. 'Gentleman are apt to talk like that if they are disturbed at night for a mere trifle,' I said. 'And, of course, the Colonel has been accustomed to his men, he had only to say 'come,' and they came, or 'go,' and they went.' (This, somehow, reminded me of my Dad and the Gospels. I think I must have heard him read the words.) 'Officers who have a lot of soldiers under them are apt to think lightly of domestic servants.'

'That's true, ma'am—and there are some gentlemen as treat them as the dirt under their feet—only I will say for 'is Lordship as 'e ain't one! I expecks when I go to 'im, as I mean to do as soon as I'm dressed, and tell 'im what I 'ave to tell 'im, ther'll be such a to-do in this 'ouse as ain't been since *you* come into it.'

'You will not go to Lord Wendell and make mischief,' I said. 'For if you do, I will also go, and tell him how

you talked of my sister and the ways of the house to the very girl you allude to as one we oughtent to touch with the tongs.' This made her turn perfectly green. She was easy game after that. She swore she would keep her mouth shut and behave as a mute at a funeral until she left here. Then I went on to Juliette, who was lying quite collapsed. Every time I spoke to her she buried her face in the pillow and groaned. Only when, thinking that she was entirely overcome by the idea that she was to clear out, precipitately, together with her enemy, Dingwall, I told her she was not to think anything of what her master had said in his natural annoyance at being awakened out of his sleep, *I* was her mistress, no one else in the house had any right to find fault with her or to order her about except myself, she began to pick up.

She came to so wonderfully that I felt almost delighted. The girl must like me, and the place, or she would not have been so ecstatically grateful, kissing my hands and saying that it was her proud position in life to serve an *ange*.

'I am no angel, and if I say no more about your silly and annoying quarrels with Dingwall, you must swear to me you will hold your tongue *to* her, and *about* her, until she leaves here,' I said. She was even easier to manage than Dingwall was, so I soon went back to bed and to sleep, for the dogs had ceased barking, and my fright about burglars and the worry of the servants' storm in a teacup had tired me out.

I hardly knew Henry next day, he was so nice to me. I told him how I had settled matters, and he said I was

a 'little bit of wisdom.' 'I wish you had had a better chap than me for a husband, girlie,' he said, with a sigh. 'You would have been far happier with a Johnnie like old Sobersides. What are you blushing for, eh? You two seem to hit it off even better than Flo and I do. You can't deny it!'

'I wish you wouldn't talk like that,' I said. 'It hurts me!'

It *did*. It made me shy of Captain Wilmot—of the best, staunchest friend woman ever had. I did not accept his little attentions nicely. Every time he looked at me, I looked away, with a grim *moove*. I would not play chess with him, and only spoke to him—he was always on my left hands at meals—when politeness obliged me to. Did he notice the difference? Does he notice it? He makes no sign.

July —th.—Yesterday was the most tremendous day in my life! After breakfast Captain Wilmot followed me—I was going to the offices to give orders.

'Are you going to this picnic to-day?' he asked me, just as sweetly and gently as if I had been nice to him all along. 'For I am leaving this afternoon, and can't spare time—and I have much to say to you—for I am leaving for South Africa for at least a year.'

'What?' I said. The words seemed to buzz about my head—they stung me—what was it? 'Oh—I am giddy,' I said. Everything reeled. He propped me up against the wall. He urged me, in that old, tender voice, to 'hold up. . . .'

Giddiness passes, fortunately! Presently I was

master of my body again, although my heart and soul were in literal agony.

'You cannot go—you must not go,' I urged. 'What can I do, what should I do, without *you*? I cannot, will not—stand alone!'

'I will tell you all about it,' he said. 'And if, after you have heard all, you tell me to stay—I will! Where can I see you after lunch?'

'The gardens,' I said, or rather gasped. I clung to his hand for a few moments—it was deadly cold—then I went on into the kitchens. I sat down, and the amiable boy *chef* brought me his suggestions for the menus of the day. I read the items carefully, but to my alarm I was *stupefied*, I could not understand a word. So I crossed nothing out, I returned the slate with a 'very good.' I saw him look at me wistfully. I supposed my mortal anguish was written on my face. I would not interview any *woman*, so I left my housekeeper without any instructions, and after seeing them off to the picnic, retreated to my room, and flinging myself on my bed, abandoned myself to an overwhelming flood of agonising grief.

## XIV

MAYBURY TOWERS, *August 1st.*—I left myself on my bed, writhing in my anguish, 'as the thorn fastened in me.'

Yes—it is agony—this loss of mine—of a great, wise Friend. But I would not return to the time before I welcomed him, dressed as a bride, with a kiss on his dear, fine brow—oh no! A thousand times no!

This is the first time I have got the better of my heartsickness enough to sit down at my desk and write about it all. If—oh, awful, impossible if—he should get fever and die out there, and not return at the end of the year, my only comfort on earth will be thinking of him, reading all about him in this. . . .

Here goes!

I must have been a perfect fright, with my swollen eyes and puffy cheeks, which no bathing with toilet-vinegar and water made much difference to, when I came upon him in the hall and we went out into the garden. I struck off at a grass-walk which led directly to that bench under the weeping willow by the river. That we should go there was the only remark I made, and but for a few words about the excursion the others were making—I felt he hardly knew what he said any more than I cared to hear it, except for the fact that *he* was speaking, that his deep, *cultured* tones were, as usual, delicious music to my ears—we were

both silent. I had been glad of my big white parasol, which I had despised on a previous occasion, for I could tilt it so that it hid my red nose and puffy cheeks from him—but when we arrived at ‘my bench,’ as it seems doubly to be now, I shut it up and flung it down. . . .

‘Don’t think I have made myself a hideous sight, crying my eyes out just because you said you were leaving me to fight by myself for myself for a whole year,’ I began, trying to steady my voice and succeeding, I think, just a little. ‘But it came as the last straw! I have been so bothered with our two maids, Flo’s and mine—they literally *fought*—and Henry left me to settle affairs *sub rosa*. A difficult matter!’

‘It must have been,’ he said consolingly. ‘And I fear you will have more difficult matters to settle in the future—and the more you arrange things according to your own ideas, the better for every one! You *ought* to stand alone. That is why I think it is a very good thing I am going away. I should only hinder you—and could do no good.’

‘Oh! That is absurd!’ I cried, feeling almost angry with him. (It did me good.) ‘You are tired of helping me—consoling me!’

He interrupted. ‘You *know* I am not—be true to your own self,’ he sternly said. ‘I told you, that if, after hearing what I have to tell you, you bid me stay, I will fling everything overboard and obey you!’

It was just like a thunderbolt out of the bluest, clearest summer sky—that extraordinary speech of his. I forgot everything in a sense of danger: what

danger I did not know—but fear actually made my teeth chatter.

‘You are a child, dear, in the best sense of the word,’ he went on (not looking at me—I always *feel* when he does—but straight across the river to the meadows where our cows and horses were grazing). ‘But you are a woman also—with all a woman’s most natural and most beautiful emotions. I am going to speak the truth to you. I think you can bear it.’

‘Yes,’ I forced myself to say. My heart was beating as if it was a runaway engine.

‘Now—true—you know what I am going to say?’ I shook my head. Then I felt suddenly desperate. ‘I know what I should like you to say!’ I cried. ‘That—you feel for me—just a little—as I feel for you!’

He took my hand in one of his. With the other he lifted my chin, and looked into my eyes. ‘A thousand times more,’ he said. ‘From the first moment I awoke from sleep at a touch on my forehead and saw you standing there, all white, like a woman-angel, my whole heart and soul went out to you—my heart has never been my own since, and hard is the struggle between my heart and will—not to injure you. . . . For, as I can foresee the future, if I did not go away and hold no communication with you whatever, I should injure you mortally. You would be calumniated. It might be a temptation to you. And you are capable of dealing with—everything as it comes.’

‘But—you said—if I asked you to stay, you would!’ I stammered. I was clinging to his arm, feeling weak, spent, yet gloriously happy.

‘If you do, I will. But you will not! I must speak

plainly. If I go, I am almost certain that we shall be together, before long, and honoured by the world as I long to see you—till death. If I stay—your name will be dragged through the mud. Every one will triumph over you—and me—and such will be my remorse that I shall never be able to lift my head among my fellow-men again !'

'You shall not suffer anything on my account, you angel of a man,' I said, kissing his coat-sleeve. (Why shouldn't I? Dogs lick the people they love, and they are none the worse for it—rather the better.) 'You shall go—stay away your year, and "hold no communication with me whatever," as you call it! But—you will say good-bye to me—give me one kiss——'

He gave me a long, tender look, then raised my hand, and kissed it lightly, gently.

'You might have to answer questions about me on oath,' he said, 'and you shall always be able to call God to witness that we have only been—friends.' He stood up. 'You understand?' he asked.

I nodded, and stood up also, as he glanced at his watch. 'There is only just time for me to catch my train,' he began in a suddenly businesslike manner. 'I have more to say to you—it will do as we go along. First of all, don't believe for one moment that there is anything radically out of order with your sister. She is far too fond of herself to get herself into serious trouble. Do you know, I am more sorry for her than for you?'

'Oh !' I said, stopping short.

'You have only one man's whims to study—I mean, the sort of man Henry is,' he said, with a smile. 'She

has both her peculiar husband and peculiar friend. My advice to you is, if anything should happen to worry you more than usual—anything connected with Henry—to cling to Lady Wendell. You two together could fight any number of Henrys.'

It warmed me, somehow—and certainly greatly relieved me to hear he thought so well of Flo. In fact, after his departure—I saw him off just as if it were an ordinary guest leaving in an ordinary way—the idea that I might rely on Flo instead of doubting her steadied me enormously. I was able to turn to Jenkins and give some orders in quite a commonplace manner, though the rattle of the motor-car lessening in the distance was positive physical pain, as if I was being prodded by a fiendish pitchfork—and when I got upstairs to my room the remembrance of his stoic, Spartan conduct—although he might never see me again, refusing to give me one kiss, to hold me in his arms just once—gave me both strength and courage.

Then, as if it were a talisman, I opened a folded paper he had given me, with the address of a friend of his to whom I promised him to apply for help if anything puzzled me in my life with Henry. It was the man's private address in Kensington. This Mr Talacre was, he said, an important member of an important legal firm, and he (Captain Wilmot) had placed in his hands certain papers which would materially assist him in any advice he might have to give me.

I thought this rather strange. I pondered over it as I sat chewing the cud of my happiness in my own room.

For, although he had gone away, and for a whole year, it is so glorious to know that he cares for me that that thought is like the serpent in Scripture which swallowed up all the other serpents.

When Flo returned, I welcomed her with a smiling face.

'Good gracious! I am glad you are able to smile now old Ironsides is gone, Nell,' she said, as I gave her her tea. 'I really began to fancy you were nuts on him—and it isn't any cop to be nuts on one of those prigs who are their own little tin gods.'

. . . . .

*August —th.*—Yesterday the last of my party went. It was Henry. This is how it happened that he was so utterly disgusted that he had to accept Regy's offer to take a trip to Paris in his company.

Bellona and Snuffles came to dine, and Bellona was in the most warlike of all warlike humours. She spoke to both Regy and Henry all dinner-time as if they were her own two naughty boys run away from school, or brought back ignominiously from robbing orchards, or something. They took it very well, and disappeared quietly, so Snuffles said when he came into the drawing-room immediately after us with Lionel Wynward, as if she had threatened them with a whipping.

'Let's have a game of bridge, you and me and Mr Wynward and that delightful little sister of hers,' he suggested, and we had a card-table out, and sat down to 'ladies bridge,' as Snuffles calls it. I was glad, for I could see something was wrong between Bellona and Flo and did not want any more storms in teacups.

Bellona, however, suggested the picture-gallery to Flo, and they went off together, evidently to have it out with each other, whatever it was. Lionel fell asleep on a distant easy-chair, his head on his chest (he really ought to wear a bib, poor thing,) and I tried to be interested in the game. . . . But my thoughts were far away, with *him*. . . .

I was really afraid, when my elder sisters came into the drawing-room again without, to all seeming, their differences being anywhere near a favourable adjustment, that the next thing I should hear was that Flo and Reg would not go on to Skye Castle—and somehow, I feel as if it might make Flo pause and *think* a little, if she were in that deadly dull place alone with Reg, Bellona, and Snuffles. However, they went the very next day, and the day after that the Wynwards departed.

I had thought Henry's manner to me was rather odd, but only after all our guests were off the premises did I learn the truth.

He hates me—it is nothing more nor less than hatred—for he will not believe a single word I say. After dinner he took me into the gardens and there, white with rage, accused me with having told 'foul lies' about him to both my sisters. 'You have poisoned their minds with your disgraceful suspicions,' he said—refusing to give me further particulars.

How was it that I did not feel utterly *crushed*? Well, for one thing I was entirely innocent of anything of the kind. Another thing is what Henry my husband does and says (not the imaginary Henry that I loved, I know now with only a girl's silly calf-love) affects me

hardly at all. In fact, when he left me with a curse upon me and the whole of my sex, I let him go without an attempt to conciliate him—for I cannot, with my whole heart and soul alive anew with an overpowering love for *him*, return to wifely submission. . . . I had meant to tell Henry, as soon as they were all gone, that I should like to go on as we were. I am saved the worry and trouble.

Now—I am alone—free! Free to roam about the place and recall every look and word of *his*—free to spend hours where he spoke—where he told me that he cared for me a thousand times more than I did for him.

Regy came and had a long confab with Henry—then I heard they meant to take a trip to Paris together—and the very next morning they started.

August —th. 29 C— St., London.—Can I be the same person who wrote those words above? It is hard to believe it. One fortnight—and from a foolish girl I have changed into a sad, chastened woman.

I seem to have no hope of anything anywhere. I should think people feel like that when they have been dug out after an earthquake, or an explosion in a coal mine, or after they have been in a siege.

It has truly been an awful *storm*. It began with 'a cloud no bigger than a man's hand.' About three days days after I had been left alone at the Towers, Juliette came into the garden after me with an open telegram in her hand. She was white and shaking, and could hardly speak. The wire was from a town on the Seine. Her mother was dying, she must come at once if she

wanted to see her alive. Of course I said 'Go at once,' and looked out her trains, and advanced her wages (she had just been paid). I would not let Mrs Martin see her off, as she wanted to—I feared—there was a look in Martin's eye I did not like—that she would 'give the girl a piece of her mind,' as she had threatened to do after the event, the hysterics in the night. So I went myself—and a more miserable, hopeless sort of creature I never said 'good-bye' to.

It was only three days later that a telegram was brought me which I thought odd at once—for it was directed to—

'HENRY,  
C/o Delincourt,  
Maybury Towers.'

'I don't think this can be for either your master or myself, Jenkins,' I said, turning it over. 'It must be for Thomas.' ('Thomas' was our name for Henry, the second footman, as Henry naturally disliked his using the same name as himself.)

'There *was* a telegram come some little time back, ma'am, directed just like that, and the Colonel opened it and said it was all right,' he said doubtfully.

'Very well. I will see if I can send an answer, or whether I should send it on to your master,' I said. (Henry had ordered Jenkins to send on his correspondence, at once, to the Poste Restante, Paris.)

I opened it, and stared, hardly believing my own eyes. In fact, for a moment or two I must have lost consciousness from the shock. For this was the message which will haunt me to my dying day:—

'My only dearest, I beg you to come to me at once  
I am broken-hearted. You must come to your  
'FLO.'

'Flo !' I stupidly repeated in my mind. Flo—who summons Henry as her 'only dearest'—who is broken-hearted without him ! I was right, then . . . my sister *did* love my husband distractedly, worse, she *does* love him. I did not feel anger towards her, poor soul; but towards *him*? GOD forgive me ! Anger brought consciousness, self-possession. And I evidently needed it. For Jenkins, when I turned to him, looked terror-stricken, poor old thing, as he stammered out, 'I 'ope as it's not bad news, ma'am ?'

'It might be, Jenkins, for Lady Wendell is ill—it may be very ill—I shall have to go to her at once—'

'Will you send a telegraph, ma'am? No? I'll look out the trains. You'll go by the twelve? The Panhard? I'll send up Marsh to your room.' (Marsh, the head-housemaid, was acting for Juliette.) 'It do seem sad, while his Lordship's away, for pore Lady Wendell to be took worse. We all thought as she was lookin' very bad when she come 'ere.'

I actually cannot remember anything about that journey. I know I sat in the railway-carriage feeling so stunned that I had to struggle to realise what the shock, which had stupefied me past feeling and thought, had beeen. I can just recall asking a porter to call me a 'taxi' and driving along the streets, wondering at the calm expression on the faces of most of the passers-by. (There cannot be such a *vast* difference between Henry and other men—there must be *some* miserable wives.)

I only seemed to come to life when, my cab dismissed, the big, stolid-looking individual who is head of Flo's male staff begged me to come in, although her Ladyship was out. 'It's only the dressmaker's, ma'am, and her Ladyship will be sure to be back to luncheon. Perhaps she doesn't expect you? Shall I telephone to say as you've come?'

'No—no, I will wait for her,' I stammered. Then, sinking into one of the soft settees in her boudoir, after refusing Peacock's offers of refreshment, I began to feel somewhat scared. I took out the telegram and looked at it again. It had been sent off from a mid-London office: and there were those incriminating words—that worse than incriminating signature.

Then an idea flashed upon me. *If it were a hoax!* I had almost finished a book from the library, a detective story, where some burglars, planning a burglary on a large scale, sent a bogus message to the heads of the house, to say some relative was at death's door, and they must come at once—and when their backs were turned, and the servants were doing the mice playing while the cats were away, the thieves made a 'clean sweep' of everything valuable they could lay hands on.

Or—it might be some man of business—betting man, even—wiring Henry in cipher. He once told me about private codes, and said that the appealing messages in 'agony columns' were mostly the 'upper ten' among thieves giving each other 'straight tips.'

I felt almost as if I were the wretched dupe of a gang of wicked people, when Flo literally burst into the room. 'Whatever has happened?' she cried. 'Speak! Is it Regy?'

'Are you dying of a broken heart?' I said. And then, for the first time it flashed upon me how unlikely it would have been for Flo not to know that Henry was not at the Towers. He could hardly have left Regy without Regy mentioning the fact. 'Perhaps you can make something of this,' I lamely said, producing the fateful slip and handing it to her.

'Some one must have used m—y—name—the question is, *who?*' she slowly said, looking at me straight with great, wondering eyes. 'Give me the envelope.'

As she scrutinised the address, her expression hardened. Then she re-read the message, and looked almost as grim as Bellona.

'You poor little dear,' she said, more kindly than she had ever spoken to me since we both were born—and she came and sat down by me and kissed my cheek—'Why would you not believe my warning? I knew that if you two came together there would be an explosion! It needed a very different sort of woman to be *his* wife.'

'What do you mean?' I asked her.

She compressed her lips, looked at the carpet, and shook her head.

'My dear, this is a woman,' she said compassionately. 'Henry used to seem a decent sort of fellow. I was so fond of him that he could always talk me into fresh belief in him. But this—this—is fatal! I am afraid he is a downright bad egg!'

'I don't understand. This—from a woman,' I stupidly said, as I watched her narrowly scrutinising the telegram. She was deeply in thought for some minutes, turning and twisting the wretched thing; then she suddenly faced me, a light in her eyes.

'Tell me—truth, mind, Nell—do you love him enough to forgive him everything?' she asked. 'For if so—you poor child, I will leave you to struggle and fight through as so many others have to do—'

'Love him? I loathed him before we had been married a week!' I cried. 'It was awful—for no one had ever told me anything—and I had an idea that marriage was like the poets' descriptions—'

'I believe hell is paved with poets, not with good intentions,' Flo hissed between her clenched teeth. . . . Then she took my hands in hers, and got everything out of me—the whole history of my life since marriage—until she suddenly closed her eyes and said, 'That will do! . . . The nauseating hound! . . . Nell, you must sift this. I will help you. Will you let me?'

I was only too thankful. 'But how—will you help me?' I helplessly, hopelessly asked.

'Will you let me act—and just tell you each step as we go along?' she asked. When I acquiesced, luncheon was announced, and we had to act, behaving and talking as usual before the servants. As soon as it was over, we started in her own particular motor.

I was rather startled, for she told the chauffeur 'Queen's Hall.'

'You are surely not going to a concert?' I asked her.

'I *was* going—Daisy Wynward and Blanche have taken seats, mine is next theirs,' she said. 'And it will just suit our plans. You will come in with me—then I shall explain to them that I cannot stay—they are always in time—then you and I start in a hired cab on our travels.'

## XV

I CERTAINLY felt a little impatient to know my sister's plans. Although the car swung along to the Queen's Hall as fast as the young French chauffeur dared go, it seemed an hour before we alighted and went in, Flo telling him he was not to return for her, she might be going on elsewhere afterwards.

Just as we were waiting for the doors to open—Flo meant to wait just inside the hall—in came Daisy and Blanche, in charming toilettes, gay, bright, very disappointed that we were not staying for the concert, 'desolated' that I was only 'up for a few hours' shopping as Flo put it.

'You really must keep her, Flo, and we must have a field-day, to-morrow, to show the little country mouse the sights, and dine at a restaurant and go to the theatre, Lionel shall take a big box for us all—'

Flo promised to keep me if she could, and explained, as we walked quietly out into the handsomest street in London, that it was quite possible it might suit us for me to remain, perhaps even a few days, with her.

'We shall see,' she said. We walked a short distance, then she hailed a taxi-cab. I did not overhear her instructions to the chauffeur, so, as we swung along Oxford Street, asked her where we were going.

'To the post office the telegram was sent from,' was her reply. 'Why? You dear baby, the first step to

find out who dared play the devil with my name is to discover the name and address of the sender.'

'Will they give it you?' I asked.

'They shall!' she replied. When I suggested that if the thing was planned by burglars they would probably invent a name and address she looked at me pretty sharply.

'You have burglars on the brain,' she said. 'Still, you have your head screwed on right; you will behave yourself if we come across startling facts.'

Presently we halted. She told me to stay where I was and disappeared into the post office. The cab began to throb as if it was driven by a wild beast shut up in its works, and wondering whether it meant to blow up and scatter me in fragments to the four winds of heaven occupied the many minutes Flo was absent. At last she appeared, and the chauffeur opened the door. But she shook her head. 'Can you go to Epsom and back?' she asked.

It seemed he had just started the second time with the shut-up fury fed for many hours, and was apparently pleased with the idea, but began bargaining, upon which Flo flared up, and said he would be the owner of three sovereigns if he brought us back safe and sound that afternoon to the place from which we started. He turned very red—and we were soon whirling along.

'I have the address of the sender,' she said. 'Fortunately for me, the two young men believed every lie I told them. A sickly looking boy brought the message, took a receipt, and gave the address. The name is, Henry—a Mrs Henry sent it.'

'Oh, Flo! If after all it should be our footman—'

I mean, sent to him. Which one? Thomas, the goodlooking, civil one. Henry gave him the name of Thomas because he would not have a servant called by his name. He may be secretly married, and have his letters and messages addressed to him by his service-name. . . .

Flo gave me a peculiar look, and told me I was the most delicious little innocent. But she allowed me to go on about Henry the footman, as we spun through the streets, then into and out of suburbs, then into the open country. Presently, at least soon after I had suggested Thomas as an explanation of what seemed to me a wild-goose-chase, she fell asleep. At least she made herself as comfortable as she could on the high seat, and shut her eyes. I gazed out of window and began to be uncomfortably afraid that I had started a storm in a teacup on my own account. But after all, Flo wanted to find out who had used her name—so it didn't really matter.

While I was consoling myself in this way, the chauffeur halted, and coming to the door said that this was the road—should he turn into it, and motor up to the cottage?

It was quite a country lane, the road somewhat rough. About a hundred yards up were a few white, red-roofed cottages.

'I think we will walk, and you can either wait for us here, or follow us up,' was Flo's fiat to our driver. So we started to walk. As we went along, she told me the name of the cottage—it was 'Willow Cottage.'

'What do you mean to say when you get there?' I asked.

'Demand the disconsolate "Flo," the "Mrs Henry" of the telegram, of course I' she returned.

I followed her as she opened the little garden gate—'Willow Cottage' was the first, and largest, of the three, and the garden, small as it was, was a mass of flowers. 'Why—it is empty—all the blinds are down,' I said. The cottage had a deserted look. But when Flo pressed the button of the electric bell in the rustic, rose-covered porch, I heard movements within. Doors opened and shut, then there was the sound of heavy footsteps, and a neat, heavy-faced maid opened the door—and looked as if she had never seen two decently dressed ladies before (as I expect she had not—*there*).

'Is Mrs Henry at home?' asked Flo.

The girl's face worked, tears came into her eyes, then she said, 'Will you please come in, and I will tell Mrs Brown?'

Flo marched in, across the tiny, well-furnished hall, into a small, but well-arranged sitting-room, where the maid shut us in. The first item I noticed was the heavy odour of white wreaths which seemed to me to meet the eye everywhere.

'There is death in this house,' I said to Flo—and just as I spoke the door opened, and a pretty old woman in widows' weeds came in.

'Oh! Have you brought news of Mr Henry?' she asked, as if her life depended on our being acquainted with such intelligence. 'My dear child calls for him incessantly—and I have written where he told us to write, and telegraphed, and all in vain! You see, ladies, my dear daughter has lost their only child—a sweet little girl—it was quite sudden. At least, a few

days ago she seemed as bright and well as ever—then she was taken with convulsions, and died in thirty-six hours.'

I was thinking, with misgiving, that poor Thomas had been cheated of his summons to his bereaved wife and their dead child, when I seemed to come to myself with a distinct shock.

'Yes—my son-in-law said as Colonel Delincourt was his best friend, and would not fail to forward all letters at once to him. He would always know where Jim was. My son-in-law is a traveller for a wine-merchant in the City,' she went on. 'My daughter met him about six months after she went on the stage. ' My husband was alive then, he was clerk of the works in D-ton' (she named a small northern town). 'Flo she had such a turn for acting that at last we let her give up the dressmaking and go her own way. When she come to London, she got a small part at a big theatre—but when Jim fell in love with her, he took her off the stage. She wrote to me and said she had been married for six months, and all about her handsome husband, and I was quite glad, for I've been brought up to think the stage a temptation to young girls. She has been as happy as happy, poor dear girl' (here she took out a deeply black-bordered handkerchief and mopped her eyes). 'Excep' for his having had to be a way so often and so long, he's been the best husband as any man could be. And now! Well, I did expect as when he got the news of Enid's death —they had her christened Enid, I thought it a funny name—he he would be here. . . .'

'Colonel Delincourt is in Paris, unfortunately,' I

said, wondering who this 'traveller' patronised by Henry might be. 'That is the reason Mr Henry has 'not heard.' I felt quite guilty, thinking I had prevented a really fond father from joining his wife at the death-bed of their child. Then I said who I was—and that the very first moment I would send a wire to my husband to inform his friend at once, so that he might be present at the funeral—a point which seemed the one desirable thing in life to the pretty old lady.

'Do come and see the sweet little dear,' she pleaded. 'She is that lovely and peaceful, just like a little angel, that it couldn't but make any one pleased to think that some day they'll lie just like that, waiting for the blessed Resurrection.'

I rose at once. Flo frowned and made signs to me not to go, but I would have my way—and followed Mrs Brown out into the tiny hall and up a narrow staircase to an equally narrow passage. Here she opened a door, and I was in the tiniest bedroom I ever saw—I don't believe any of our stable lads have such a cupboard to sleep in—but it was all white, with white furniture—and on the brass bedstead I could see there was a human form under the sheet which covered the whole bed.

The little old widow removed this gently—oh, so tenderly!—and I saw, laid out, with lovely waxen hands crossed on her breast, a child more like a dead angel (if there could be such a thing) than a human being plunged in that last sleep which must some day overtake each one of us. Her well-formed features, slightly aquiline, looked as if carved in alabaster. Her golden curls, pencilled brows, and long, curled

eyelashes seemed almost unnatural on the sweet, dead face, which, with its close-shut lips—a perfect Cupid's bow—was absolutely statuesque.

'How lovely! Sweet child! She must have been a beauty,' I said sympathetically. 'Poor mother! I am sorry.'

'Ah yes, and poor Dad,' brokenly said the grandmother. 'The store he set by that child! The money he spent on her! Nothing was good enough! I've often said to my daughter as Jim would be punished for bringing Enid up to be a fine lady, when ten chances to one as she'd have her living to get, and as far as I can find out he hasn't insured his life—he always laughs and says he has a nest-egg somewhere better than any insurance. But I myself haven't got any sort of faith in the nest-eggs men sometimes talk about, and am glad my pore husband hadn't neither, for he made a point of insurin' his life in the Prudential, knowing as I couldn't have borne to be a burden on a child or any relations.'

Meanwhile, I was studying that lovely dead face. It reminded me forcibly of some living face I had been seeing quite lately. But whose?

'Is she like her mother?' I asked.

'You wouldn't believe they was mother and child,' said Mrs Brown, re-covering the bed with the big sheet. 'That you wouldn't! She has eyes just like her Dad's. Indeed, she is just the image of him. Oh! His portrait is hanging here—I'll take it down and show it you.'

She detached a small oak-framed picture from its nail on the wall at the bottom of the bed, and opening the door, beckoned me out. •

'I will draw up the drawing-room blind—I should like you to see Jim's portrait, because, as you belong to his friend, Colonel Delincourt, you might know where he is likely to be and send another telegraph,' she said, as she cautiously climbed down the ladder-like stairs, I following with equal caution.

Flo started as we entered. I noticed she had a scared look on her face. 'I am going to show you ladies my poor son-in-law's photograph,' said Mrs Brown, pulling up the venetian blind with the same caution which characterised all her movements—as if sounds could injure the quiet dead. 'He never would be took proper, as I call it, but one day a friend of theirs, a neighbour, I should say, for they live at Elm Villa, next house but one from this, took a snapshot of him and Flo as they were a standin' looking into the baby's bassinet, and it turned out so well that he enlarged it afterwards and gave it to Baby, as she was then, on her first birthday.'

I leant over one of Mrs Brown's shoulders—she was a short woman—and Flo peeped over the other. I wonder I did not give a *squeal*. (I found afterwards I had bitten my tongue.) There was my husband, Henry—an exact portrait—with his arm round a pretty looking young woman—at least she was that in profile. They were standing under a tree, looking into one of those swan bassinets—those expensive things on pedestals.

Mrs Brown drew our attention to the cradle as 'bein' fit for a princess,' then adjured us both to convey the news of his little daughter's sudden death to 'Jim,' as she believed we might be able to do.

'It's for his sake as well as poor Flo's, for I know he'll cut up dreadful,' she said, as by common consent we made our way out of the house, through the garden, into the road. She talked all the time, fortunately—for Flo seemed speechless, and if I had been threatened with being killed next minute I could not have articulated a single syllable.

We walked along the lane in dead silence for a little while, neither of us glancing at the other. At last, when we had passed the turn of the road, Flo stopped short and held one hand over her heart, as if she were in pain.

'Oh—you poor child! *What* am I to say to you?' she panted. She really looked so bad I felt alarmed, and began to think of getting her into the cab and motoring to the nearest doctor's.

'Don't call me "poor," pray!' I cried. 'I feel rich—for I am free—free! I have never been his wife!'

'Nell!' She leant up against a tree-trunk. 'What do you mean?'

'Mean?' I returned. 'How can I be his wife if he has been married years ago, and had that child?'

'*Married!*' she scornfully repeated, beginning to walk on. 'As if a man of his sort would *marry* a woman of that class! Poor innocent, you have a lot to learn! No, there is only one important fact we have to be certain about—whether he has been at his precious cottage since you were married to him. He will find himself in an awkward fix if he has!'

'What fix?' I asked.

'Will you be content to have half a husband, Nell?

For if you are, you are past praying for !' she bitterly said.

'I don't want a whole husband, or half a husband, I want to be free !' I cried almost joyfully—for now that I was beginning to realise the situation, a great feeling of delighted hope was springing up in my soul (the soul which belongs to *Dred Wilmot*).

'You *mean* that? It is not only your natural anger with him?' Again Flo stopped. But this time the colour had partly returned to her cheeks; she looked more her pretty, pink, pouting self. Just now I should have described her as a haggard, drawn, wretched-looking person; much, very much older than I know Flo is.

'My feeling is—that to be free is—would be too good to be true !' I cried.

'Come along,' she said, linking her arm in mine. 'Let us shake the dust of this place off our feet and get back home as soon as ever we can! I must have time to think. . . . What a mercy Regy is away! Men always stick by one another. I believe there must be a code of honour among them that the greatest friendship man can show to man is to perjure himself! In fact, Regy has told me as much. He has said that he should glory in telling any number of lies on oath if it would get a pal out of trouble. . . .'

I thought the taxicab driver stared at us, rather, when we returned, and assisted us into the vehicle with extra care. If I looked at all like Flo, I don't wonder. I should have set her down as a woman who had just been told she was utterly ruined.

She took my hand in hers in the cab, but remained

silent—while I was trying to believe in my good fortune. Flo might have her own ideas. I, myself, believed that the young woman in the photograph was Henry's legal wife, and I was *not*. Had I not read cases of bigamy in the newspapers I had managed to 'sneak' from the newspaper-table—*years* ago? Of course, it would mean prison for Henry—but if it did, he richly deserves it. Meanwhile, my delight at the prospect of freedom was so great that I felt quite sorry for him. I thought of what he would suffer when he saw that lovely girl-child lying dead—and would very likely think her death a punishment to him for his wicked conduct. . . I had just arrived at imagining him kneeling by the bed in an agony of remorse, when Flo gave a little cry.

'Look!' she said.

I looked—and saw a motor slowing down to pass ours—the road was narrow at that point. In it sat—*Henry*. But I should hardly have recognised him—so was his deadly white face altered by a most horrible expression. He really looked as if the only thing in life which would please him was—to kill every creature on the face of the earth at one blow.

'Did you see him?' asked Flo, her eyes ablaze. 'You did? And you can look quiet? Heavens! But—of course—I understand! You never did care for him! At least, it is either that, or you are an icicle!'

'He said I was that,' I told her. 'When? Oh—we hadn't been married a day when he told me I was an icicle, a fraud, not worthy of the name of woman, and a lot more. I didn't mind—for I felt that unless he took a sort of dislike to me, I should not be able to bear it.'

'Remember my warning, which you would not take,' she bitterly said. 'Even then I had no idea he was such a blackguard! Don't think Regy is like that, Nell! He told me frankly when we were engaged that he was "no saint," but promised that I should never have cause to divorce him, as you have in this case. You *must* divorce Henry, dear! Unless you do, I wash my hands of you—so would every decent woman, I tell you that!'

'But—why, we have been married barely two months,' I returned, my spirits rising higher and higher. 'Can one get divorced so early in the day?'

'Of course—under such circumstances as these,' she said. And so determined was she that before Henry had time to 'talk me over' I should solemnly promise her I would at once take steps 'to right myself,' as she called it, that before we reached home I had given her my word to obey her implicitly.

Should I have done so—if Captain Wilmot's words to believe in Flo, to ally myself to her, had not been repeating themselves in my mind—haunting me as a tune does sometimes?

Perhaps not! However, it is never of any use to ask oneself what one might have done in other circumstances. How can one know?

## XVI

AUGUST —th.—As soon as dinner was over, and we were closeted in Flo's boudoir with the padded *portière* over the locked door, I showed her the paper with the address of a Mr Talacre, one of the legal firm, to whom I had been advised to apply in case of any trouble with Henry.

She was jotting down things in a little notebook, as she leant back in her easy-chair. She suddenly sat up, and looked me straight in the face.

'Hallo!' she exclaimed. 'You—little hypocrite! Now I know why you are so cool about it all! Old Sobersides! I thought he was sweet on you! What a mercy he is off the board—or it would have been checkmate to a certainty!'

'Don't be absurd,' I said—but my face burnt like fire. 'I know what you mean! But you are *quite wrong*! Captain Wilmot has been a good friend to me—and seemed to me to fancy I should have trouble presently—that's all!'

'I should think he did fancy you would have trouble presently, considering that he must have heard the gossip about that wretched Juliette,' she said. 'What gossip? To think you should have been so blind! So gullible! It was the talk of the servant's-hall at your house, and Isabel's.'

'What was?' I asked, puzzled.

'My dear—if that wretched man did not know her

before, which, of course, we can't tell—she set her cap at him at once, and being one of those Frenchwomen who seem to understand men like Henry, *got* him ! Dingwall found them together that night. She told your housekeeper, Mrs Martin—she stood up for her master—then one of the crew told some of Isabel's people. As for Isabel, she was pretty well *mad*. No wonder ! She made your match with him, as I tclt her that evening in the picture-gallery at the Towers. She was responsible ! I couldn't help being sorry for her—for Snuffles cringed and crouched like a whipped hound when she asked him to give it to Henry. He said to me, when he told me, 'I couldn't Flo, for the life of me—it would be the pot calling the kettle black.' Poor old Diddles ! He's been about as hot as they make 'em in his time, I'll lay ! But he was safe enough when Isabel married him, and somehow I can't dislike the old boy, there's something so genial about him ! However, don't be down on your luck, old girl, because Henry took a fancy to your handmaid. If the Dad kicks up, as he will when the volcano erupts, I shall shut him up by reminding him of his beloved Abraham and King Solomon. I say, don't *mind* : it's the very best thing that could have happened to you —for without legal cruelty you couldn't chuck Henry !'

While she held forth I was thinking hard. I saw it all—too late—the real facts of the strange happenings that night when the dogs barked and I thought there were burglars about. I told her that such an awful thing had never entered my head.

'And the girl actually kissed my hands, fawned

upon me like a dog,' I sadly said. 'Shall I ever be able to believe in any one again? I wish I had married one of Dad's men. . . .' (Then I stopped short, for that wasn't quite true. What I wanted was freedom, and I shouldn't have had it with some religious personage like Lord Danebury.) 'But what do you mean by legal cruelty? He never touched me—he only damned me a little, and banged his door in my face, locking it against me.'

'His intriguing with your maid-servant under your joint roof is cruelty to you according to the law,' said Flo sententiously. 'But don't let us waste good time in discussion. We must *act*. This Mr Talacre is probably the K.C. who is a favourite counsel with ladies bringing actions against their husbands. He can't take the case from you. But he can tell you what solicitors to go to. His firm are solicitors? That's all right, then. You ought to see him as soon as possible. I'll look up that address in the 'phone-book.'

I had no idea Flo was such a woman of business. She found Mr Talacre's private-house number and at once rang him up (the telephone is in her room). Some minutes elapsed before we were 'through,' as she called it. Then, after she asked who it was, she nodded to me and said, 'We've got him all right.' Then, for the first time (my people are old-fashioned, and the Dad wouldn't hear of a telephone), I listened to a conversation by the agency of that delightful discovery.

'Can I and my sister see you to-morrow? She is Mrs Delincourt, a friend of Captain Wilmot's. . . . Ah . . . yes . . . any time most convenient . . . thanks . . .

very good of you . . . shall we say ten o'clock? . . .  
Thanks ever so much—good-bye.'

She replaced the funny-looking tube on its hook, and turned to me. 'There, that's done,' she triumphantly exclaimed. 'Let's have a cigarette, and savour the delightful fact that the first step is taken to make you Elinor Dedeote again!'

I sighed heavily. 'I never could—can—be *that* again,' I mournfully said—thinking how lovely it would have been if I could have met Captain Wilmot that day in the wood instead of Henry.

'Well, as they say, it is of no use crying over spilt milk,' said Flo, puffing away. 'If only girls would remember that you can always *get* married, but it needs hell and Tommy to *unmarry* you, the Divorce Court would have little or nothing to do! Is it a dreadful place? My dear, I haven't been there—so I can't tell you—but I know a good many who have looked and felt jollier than ever after they have been through. Should I divorce Regy? NO. I set out determining to shut my eyes to peccadilloes, because they really don't matter so much, and are safety-valves with a man who knows what he is about. No! Regy and I can pull together in double-harness, I think, till we are too pottery and dodder to pull at all!'

She voted 'early to bed,' as we had to 'be about at such an unearthly hour'—and, to my amazement, I slept . . . even the rattling of cabs and rushing of cars in the neighbouring thoroughfare failed to awaken me. . . . When I did wake, Flo was sitting on my bed—looking fresh and lovely, all her golden hair down over her lace dressing-jacket.

'You must be one of the seven sleepers alive again!' she said. 'I have just had my bath—and Naylor, my second maid, will dress me if you will breakfast in bed—then she can see to you later. What have I done with Dingwall? I gave her a long holiday as soon as I was back here. I felt I must have her under my thumb, but at a distance. I am glad I did, now. She may be wanted as a witness. We start at half-past nine, dear—walk a little way, and take an ordinary cab. I will *not* have talk below stairs.'

At half-past nine we met in the hall and started out, Flo giving orders up to the last moment. She went through several side-streets before she chartered an ordinary hansom. The horse was fresh, so we only held on like grim death as it flew along and swung us round corners till it deposited us before Mr Talacre's door.

I suppose he must be married. The house was not only a fine one, splendidly furnished, but there is the unmistakable look of a *châtelaine* at the head of affairs which can't be under any other management. The gray-haired butler evidently knew we had an appointment and, after hearing our names, ushered us into a beautiful library overlooking some leads crowded with shrubs in green tubs. We were three minutes before the hour fixed—because of that rampageous steed in our cab—but ten strokes had only just struck in silvery tones from the big, solemn-looking clock on the mantelpiece when the door opened, and a tall, thin man with a long face, firm mouth, keen eyes under protruding brows, and a high, aquiline nose, came in and smiled as he shook hands.

'I am always glad to welcome any friends of Captain Wilmot's,' he began in a pleasant, mellow voice. 'Have you heard from him? No? Well, I have—but then, he had a commission of mine to execute, and *had* to write. He is well, and tremendously busy, building houses on a couple of farms he actually bought from their ruined owners at the close of the war. I thought it—well—just like him—he has such a heart, that big fellow! In fact, I know for certain that he purely and simply bought those farms to build up the houses and buildings and rent them to their former owners for a ridiculous sum . . . And now, Mrs Delincourt, what can I do for you? Wilmot warned me that he had recommended you to apply to me if you happened to find yourself in any "corner"—that was what he termed it—where a legal opinion would be of service. I hope the trouble is not a serious one?'

'My sister finds that she ought to divorce her husband—and although he has been my and my husband's friend for some years, I consider it is the only course open to her,' said Flo, in such clear, silvery tones that it came into my head what a fine Portia she would make—how delicious 'The quality of mercy is not strained,' etc., would sound declaimed in *that* voice.

'Dear me! I am sincerely sorry! But divorce is such a very drastic remedy for matrimonial differences,' he indulgently said, sticking a glass in one eye and looking me over, half-chidingly, half-benignantly. 'There might surely be a less public and blatant way out of the difficulty?'

'I think the best way will be for you to read my little account of all that has happened, of the facts which

determined me to advise my sister to divorce her husband,' said Flo, and she brought out some closely written sheets from her reticule and handed them to him.

'If you will allow me, I will take them to the light,' he said. Certainly, the room was shadowy—and I was glad of it, to hide my hot cheeks, for as I knew he was reading the story of Henry's conduct in my regard, I felt such shame that I wondered at myself. I was taking myself to task, and wondering what the feeling was—whether it was pride, or self-love, or what, which made me feel degraded before that friend of my friend, because he was learning how cheaply the man who persuaded me to marry him had held me as soon as he got me—when there was a rustle of the sheets, he rose, and came to us, resuming his seat opposite us.

'I must first congratulate you, Lady Wendell, on the extremely neat, correct, and succinct manner in which you have put your sister's case in a nutshell,' he began. 'Really, had you been a man, you might have made a first-class lawyer. Here is your "brief." I don't think you could do better than lodge it with the solicitors who will act for Mrs Delincourt.'

'Then—you think—she has a case?' asked Flo in a gasp.

He smiled. 'There is really more material than will be actually used,' he answered. 'But you must employ the right firm. I am sorry that my firm will not touch these cases. But I can recommend you a solicitor who is constantly dealing with the court. Do you wish to proceed to business now, at once? If so, I can telephone them, and make an appointment—that is,

if it suits you. They are the Messrs. Wittam—their offices only a stone's throw from the Law Courts.'

'Oh, that is kind of you,' I said, speaking for myself for the first time—and for a few minutes my new friend was at the telephone, interviewing this Mr Wittam, and making an appointment with him for the afternoon. Mr Wittam suggested to-morrow, but Flo said 'it was best to strike while the iron was hot,' so three o'clock was fixed. In another minute we had thanked Mr Talacre, Flo had sent a message to Captain Wilmot 'when Mr Talacre happened to be writing to him,' and accepted his offer of a newspaper which Captain Wilmot was sending him every week.

'I can always send it on, if you like,' he said suddenly.

'Oh—if you would!' I exclaimed—then was disgusted with myself for my folly, and felt I was red as fire under a very curious gaze of Mr Talacre's—as he escorted us into the hall, where a nice-looking young man was waiting to be ushered in.

'You did give yourself away, you goose!' cried Flo, as soon as we were walking along the wide road, looking out for a conveyance to take us back. 'How? By jumping at a South African newspaper because it might contain something about old Ironsides. Why shouldn't you be interested in him? Nell! Don't play the ostrich with me! I am not a born fool in all things, though I admit I am in a good many—and we could all see what was up between you and *him*! Besides, your anxiety to be "free," as you call it, means that man and nothing else! Deny it if you can!'

'I shall not answer such a suggestion—except to repeat that Captain Wilmot and I are *friends*, and any

man and woman can be that, I hope, even in this wicked world!' was my reply.

At that point Flo hailed a hansom, and we got in. It was a quieter horse this time, and as we went along she held forth to me on the importance of concealing my feelings—especially when with the lawyers. 'If this Mr Wittam knew you were being backed up by a man who has his eye on you for future *rapprochement*, he would wash his hands of the case, I do really believe—and then where would you be? If one lawyer wouldn't touch it, another wouldn't. These firms have a reputation to keep up, my dear, and have to consider that first.'

That—and a lot more. . . . I was quite glad when the cab drew up at the door of Flo's house. But as the door opened, and we passed in, my cheerful feelings changed into horror and consternation—I heard Flo's butler telling her that Colonel Delincourt had arrived—he was in her boudoir.

'Go up to your room—by the back staircase—lock yourself in—I will come to you presently,' she said in an undertone.

I fled up the stone staircase into the corridor, and in a few seconds was sitting, scared, panting, near the locked door.

There I sat—straining to hear sounds from Flo's room—although, of course, it was impossible—even if I had gone down and stood outside, that padded *portière* is an effectual deadener of all sounds.

So—he had come! He meant to patch up our torn contract; to excuse himself, to remind me that during the very first days of married life he had told me that

I must not expect him 'to be proof against the attractions of all other women;' he had laughed at the idea of a husband being entirely faithful to one wife—as if his saying all that made any difference—exonerated him from keeping his vows! . . .

Yes! He had come to insult me by offering me to share him with two others—if, indeed, that poor soul who had lost that lovely child was not his legal wife.

I watched the hands of the clock on the mantelpiece. It had been a quarter past eleven when I first came into the room. (The clock was, of course, right. The winding-up man was here yesterday.) But it seemed as if it went slower and slower every minute. An hour, surely must have passed when I heard a light footstep outside, a tiny tapping at the locked door.

I sprang to it, asking, 'Who is it?'

'Let me in,' came in a whisper through the keyhole. 'Flo.'

I opened the door as cautiously as the little widow had drawn up the blind to show us Henry's portrait—Flo slipped in. She was white—her features drawn.

She took my hand in one of hers, put her arm about me, and led me to the sofa. It was quite a motherly action—and I wondered vaguely whether she was not meant to be the mother of children.

'Tell me—truthfully—Nell—could you forgive him? If he grovelled at your feet—if he gave up all of them for you? Remember—you did love him! Think—don't answer at once! Give yourself time. . . .'

A wild spirit of I don't know what seemed to spring up within me. I snatched my hand from hers—I could not bear to be touched even—

'If I waited a thousand years, I should say the same, no, no, NO !' I cried. 'You accuse me of being a fool, an ostrich. I may be ! But I am not mad. My only chance of a decent, peaceful, sane life is to be cut adrift from him—and if you don't help me to it, I shall just rush away—anywhere—perhaps to South Africa !'

'Hush, hush, my dear, good child—I am sure they will hear you upstairs—if not across the street !' she said. 'I don't want you to make it up with Henry, far from it ! Only I *had* to convey his message to you. It will be just what I like best to tell him how emphatically you have refused !'

'What does he say?' I scornfully asked.

'Oh ! He is worse than I thought possible,' she disgustedly said. 'He isn't an atom sorry, or ashamed. I really believe he isn't capable of liking any one who belongs to him by law. Anything respectable, he loathes. He only liked me because I was his friend's wife, therefore he had no right to : and I don't believe he would have shown up, here, now, only he wants to protect that poor unfortunate girl, the mother of his child ! He swears there is no legal tie between them, and that she "quite understood his position—that he could not marry her," he termed it : he also swears that he has not been to Willow Cottage since he married you.'

'How saintly !' I sneered. I could not help it. 'I see. He wants to keep that iniquity out of the case.

'You are getting sharp,' she approvingly said. 'What? Is Juliette to be protected too? Hardly ! He seems to fix upon her as the scapegoat. What a brute he is ! I could never have imagined such a brute ! It was he

who sent that telegram about her dying mother. She is under his protection in Paris. But—what do you say? Does he agree to a divorce? He wants it, I think. He will not respond, he says—he will make it easy for you—as long as you won't drag in Willow Cottage. Perhaps the sight of his child lying dead has touched him up a bit. But I must go.'

After I had locked her out again I sat for a long time positively stupefied.

What is life—when one can be deceived as I was deceived in Henry? I thought of him when he came upon me in the wood, and began the delicate tenderness of a lover; I remembered his kisses—his poetry-reading—and it was all because he was hunting me down as the sort of woman he had not hitherto captured—an innocent girl out of the schoolroom, a 'bread-and-butter miss,' as Regy calls them. Then I cried—scalding tears—and Flo, returning, stood aghast. . . .

'You repent of having let him go!' she cried severely.

'I repent of ever having been such an abject fool as to believe any look, or word, or action of his,' I returned. 'Why did Bellona bring us together? Doesn't *she* know anything? I should think Snuffles could enlighten her on the subject of every wickedness it is possible to commit!'

'What Isabel doesn't know, my dear, is not worth knowing,' said she placidly. '(Go on crying, by the way—the very best way to enlist a divorce lawyer's sympathies is to appear swollen-eyed and limp. The one thing they abhor is a "put-up job," as Regy calls it—in other words, collusion—agreement between

husband and wife to chuck the tie.) What could Isabel want to marry you to Henry for? For one thing, to end any Society talk about him and me. He was always at the house, and as he deceived me as badly as he did you, I don't wonder there *was* gossip. That's one reason—Isabel hugs respectability as her sheet-anchor with royalty. The second was because his estates adjoin Skye Castle, and she meant to quarter an overflow of expensive guests upon you and Henry. Your marriage was *convenient* to her. Hence these tears! You shall have your lunch upstairs, dear, because then you can go on crying *ad lib.* I will sit through the meal with old Lady Dart—she has just arrived, and I persuaded her to stay to throw dust in the servants' eyes, and also because she will give us a lift in her huge landau, and set us down anywhere. The servants will think, or ought to think, we are with her.'

## XVII

I CERTAINLY looked the image of woe when I put on a thick veil brought me by Flo, for our journey in old Lady Dart's open landau. She seemed a nice old soul, rather deaf, and so absorbed in a charity bazaar she was going to that she hardly, after the first handshake, seemed aware of my existence.

Once more we were set down at Queen's Hall. After Lady Dart drove off, Flo made some inquiry at the box-office—then we issued forth, as before, and hiring a cab drove to the solicitor's office in a street off the Strand.

The house was a big, newly built one, and Mr Wittam's offices were on the first floor. Entering the outside office, where some clerks were scribbling away, behind a partition, on high stools, a nice-looking young man rose from an office table and placing chairs for us took our cards into an inner room. There were two doors, the outer one baize. (A curious idea came to me—I felt ashamed to be frivolling at such an important hour in my life. But how could I help the thought which flashed across my mind, 'a baize door hides a multitude of secrets?')

In a few minutes, or moments (I was quite incapable of judging the progress of time in this stage of my career), the amiable-looking young man returned, and ushered us into a room with any number of windows—at least, it was so light that it hurt my smarting eyes.

I had to squinny my eyelids to see Mr Wittam

properly. He was sitting behind an office table, but rose and spoke pleasantly to us as he waved us to the two heavy chairs the clerk had placed for us opposite the light. As Flo saw me blinking, and suggested pathetically that as I had bad eyes I might perhaps sit with my back to the light, and he gave me a sympathetic glance and said, 'Certainly, certainly,' in a fatherly, protective manner, I had a good look at him. He was slim, short, gray-haired, with a kind, almost comical face—for the breadth of his forehead with its straight eyebrows, and the keenness of the rather small, deep-set eyes beneath, his beak-like nose, and straight, loose-lipped mouth, gave him a sort of funny, but home-like appearance. I felt, if he were my father, I should be very fond of him.

'I understood from Mr Talacre (wonderful man that, Lady Wendell) that Mrs Delincourt has cause to complain of her husband's treatment, and wishes advice from us? Is that so?' he began.

'Certainly,' said Flo decidedly. 'As they have only been married two months, it seems early days to want a divorce—but that is what my sister determines to have, and Mr Talacre said she had every right on her side. Perhaps it would expedite matters if you were to read the facts of the case as I jotted them down. Mr Talacre said he quite understood the case after he had read them.'

'Most certainly, thanks to you, Lady Wendell,' he cordially replied. Then he took the fateful sheets which had procured us Mr Talacre's sympathy, and leaning back in his revolving chair, his left shoulder towards us, began to read.

He held them in his right hand, and except when he moved his left hand to lay the sheets aside (Flo had only covered one side of the paper) he kept on thoughtfully stroking his chin. As he read, the white papers and blotting-pad cast a kind of light on his face. His eyes seemed to me to harden and to recede into his head as he read. Now and then he cleared his throat, and raised his eyebrows—that was when he consulted a sheet he had laid aside, for comparison or something. I was on tenterhooks—for somehow I was afraid from the look of him that he would refuse to take the case. When he laid down the last sheet, which was only half covered with Flo's writing, my heart beat right up in my throat as if it would suffocate me.

'This last happened to-day, Lady Wendell?' he asked in a serious tone. 'Colonel Delincourt made a statement to you that the lady he lived with at Willow Cottage is not his wife, that he has never been through any kind of marriage ceremony with her, and that she herself is quite aware of her position?'

'Certainly,' said Flo.

'We must, of course, verify that statement, or it would mean a criminal prosecution and be a most fatal circumstance for you, Mrs Delincourt,' he went on, turning to me. 'It would indeed be a case of criminal prosecution for bigamy. However, let us hope that to snap this unfortunate tie of yours will be a far easier and pleasanter affair altogether. Did Colonel Delincourt say, positively, Lady Wendell, that he would not contest the case? I note that in your account of the interview you relate his speech that he

was "ready and prepared to submit to being divorced, without opposition, provided the lady known as 'Mrs Henry' is not brought into it." What do you say to that, Mrs Delincourt?

"You will take my case?" I breathlessly asked. "I have a case?"

He laughed. "We could run it through, undefended, upon the other count—your French maid—alone," he said, looking kindly at me. "I am happy to say brutality such as Colonel Delincourt's so soon after a marriage of his own seeking too, is rare. In fact, such a circumstance has not happened in *our* experience, though we have been busy in the Divorce Court for many years already. We might convey that part of the case to the judge—there will not be a jury—without publicly blasting Mrs Henry's reputation, or shocking the public by the exposure of such flagrant immorality as Colonel Delincourt's."

"Oh, pray don't hunt the poor thing down, Mr Wittam," I said. "If you had seen that beautiful dead child! Even my husband seems to have been punished enough already—then the little widow, Mrs Henry's mother—she firmly believed Colonel Delincourt was a Mr Henry, a commercial traveller who was properly married to her daughter. It would kill that poor simple little soul to know the truth. I don't want to step over broken hearts and dead bodies to freedom, Mr Wittam."

He looked at me with a charming smile. "Lady Wendell, your sister is certainly a practical Christian," he said.

"She is a dear, delightful donkey, and if she doesn't take care, will be her own worst enemy to the end of

the chapter! If I were she—I would have the whole thing out, and shame the men of the day, who are as bad as they make 'em, mostly,' cried Flo—she seemed annoyed for some reason or another.

'I cannot help thinking that the world would wag better if there were a few more delightful donkeys such as your sister, Lady Wendell,' he returned. 'But now, to business! May I retain this document of yours? Thanks. May I ask you a few questions, and you also Mrs Delincourt?'

We both assented—and for some little time he questioned us upon every sentence in Flo's 'correct, succinct,' account as the great Mr Talacre termed it, taking voluminous notes in some limp-covered notebook the while. Then he shut the volume with a little bang, and removed his spectacles, which he had assumed for writing.

'Thank you very much, ladies,' he said, with a relieved expression which I somehow knew meant he had done with us. 'I shall now not have to trouble you again for some little time. You will kindly give me your address, and yours, Lady Wendell? Of course, you and Mrs Delincourt understand that from now she leaves *coverture*—she must not reside under the same roof as Colonel Delincourt. Will she go to her parents? No? You will take absolute charge of her till she is a free woman? You understand, of course, that that will not be until the decree *nisi* is made absolute, six months after the decree *nisi* is pronounced? That is well! Very well! I am sure Mrs Delincourt, I congratulate you in having so charming a companion and chaperon to see you through all the

little disagreeables which attend your demand for freedom! And now, the last word—the address of Colonel Delincourt's solicitors, if you know it?’

Flo knew it. Then he bowed us into the outer office and the nice-looking clerk sprang ‘to attention’ and escorted us out with even greater obsequiousness than that with which he ushered us in.

And there my first experiences ended. I am writing them down to-night because I know I am in for one of those attacks of headache which that unfortunate Juliette calls *migraine*. To-morrow I shall probably be prostrate. To-morrow what will it bring forth?

• • • • •  
*September 19th.*—Can it be *weeks* since I penned those words?

I was feeling awfully bad when I wrote the account of our interview with Mr Wittam. I had, indeed, shivered and felt queer as soon as we were out in the open air again. I thought it was because the office had been stuffy. Flo took me into a chemist’s and gave me a draught—then made me lie down as soon as we got home. But I could not drink tea—and I shall never forget the smell of some grouse we had for dinner. She escorted me to bed and left her maid, Naylor, to sleep on the couch at the foot of the bed.

From that time I seem to have been dreaming—dreaming of pain unspeakable—of giants who fought me, then forcibly opened my mouth and poured fire down my throat—of little demons who sat upon me, grimacing, then tore my body with their hot steel claws. . . . Then, suddenly these all vanished, some power had taken my tortured body and flung it into

the sea—I was too weak to struggle—but sinking, sinking into the cool, delicious depths brought sleep, rest—I remember thinking ‘this is eternal sleep—He giveth His beloved sleep. . . .’

After long grief and pain—rest—sleep—oh! even in my semi-consciousness I felt that the One Who made us is good indeed.

I could have slept for ever, if left alone, but I was not left alone. I was harried and worried—spoons thrust into my mouth—I was made to swallow. Once, I felt strong enough to fight—only a sweet voice said, ‘You would not hurt poor Nursie, would you, dear?’

I frowned, opened my eyes—squinted, I am sure, for I saw double—and saw a lovely fair face under a cap. This roused me.

‘Elinor Perpetua is dead—I am some one’s baby somewhere else,’ was my impression. Then, she spoke. ‘You have been very ill, I have been nursing you—but you are better, much better, and will soon be quite well, if you will take what I give you! I promise you I will not worry you more than I can help,’ she said.

So I was still Elinor Perpetua! I wondered whether I was at home at the Priory, or where—and was just going to ask her, when I felt I didn’t care—I just turned over again and went to sleep.

Sleeping, being fed—days and nights passed before I was allowed to talk—but I learned to depend upon Nurse Magdalen as I must have done upon my nurse as a young baby. Then I awakened one night to see Flo. I hardly recognised her, she looked so ill. But she declared nothing ailed her.

'Only you have given us an anxious time, chickie,' she said. She had been helping the two nurses. The other one was stout and dark, Nurse Hannah. *My* favourite was Nurse Magdalen. I loved her more and more as I gradually came back to life.

It was rather a bad day when I remembered—every-thing. I cried a good deal. But both Flo and Nurse Magdalen, who had been told things by Flo, were such consolers and strengtheners that from that moment I mended rapidly. I have had several drives—right out of London, and to-morrow we three are going to a cottage just outside Brighton.

BRIGHTON, *September* —th.—This is a delightful little homestead. On the cliff, standing in a pretty garden; a hundred yards and there is a precipice below which the sea rolls and roars and tumbles and breaks upon the shingles.

Men say that women are dull folk when they are alone together. They should see and hear us! We are always laughing—and at such tiny little jokes! I have a good deal of lying up to do during the day—but the long windows of the pretty little sitting-room with its dainty white furniture open upon the garden. Then in the afternoon Nurse wheels my chair within a few yards of the cliff, and I watch the great, tumbling sea, and the craft sailing along, while the sea-birds circle above with strange cries. . . .

*October* —th.—To-morrow we go back to London. Although there is, so Mr Wittam writes, a formidable list of cases to be disposed of, we ought to be on the

spot to interview him when necessary. This afternoon it rained a little, so I was not to go out, and Flo sent Nurse into Brighton to execute a lot of little commissions.

We were alone together, at tea . . . the only sound the drip, drip of the wet creepers on to the gravel outside the verandah, and a kind of moaning, surging sound—the sea below the cliffs.

For many, many days I had been thinking of making Flo tell me what this mysterious, weakening illness of mine has been. But, while she and Nurse Magdalen were together on the scene, they were always chaffing each other and me like a couple of schoolgirls out for an unexpected holiday, and if I began being serious, they were positively *riotous*. But somehow, to-day, I noticed a change in Flo. She kept getting *distract*. Nurse, too, was less full of her nonsense. I resolved to tackle Flo. So, when we were at tea, I said she must really tell me all about my illness. I was surely old enough to be treated like a grown-up person.

Then I *heard*. I had been suddenly seized with diphtheria in a malignant form, while there were 'unusual complications.'

'The fact is, darling,' she said, holding my hand and speaking most tenderly (how I have under-rated Flo's womanliness, I feel quite sorry), 'that although it seems hard to say so, this illness of yours has been a blessing in disguise. For if you had been in good health, the chances are that in a few months you would have been—the mother of that wretched man's lawfully begotten child . . . Fancy! Oh—no—don't fancy, you dear darling—it is too bad to think of—I can't bear it!'

She—Flo—actually broke down and sobbed. We cried together—then comforted each other. She swears she will give up everything to be alone with me, to watch over me, till I am my own woman—free—free!

'In all things we shall be guided by Mr Wittam,' she said, 'He has taken the greatest possible interest in you. Your wish to shield those poor, unfortunate people appealed to him. Oh, Nell ! How dared I take you there—to that wretched cottage that day? Why? You ask what harm it did—oh, my darling girl, that poor little girl died of diphtheria !'

• • • • •

## XVIII

NOVEMBER —th, *London*.—Now that I have an hour's quiet I will write down my Divorce Court experiences.

Mr Wittam sent us a warning one day that the cases down for hearing were being disposed of at such a rate that we might have to attend any morning. Would we be in readiness?

Although I was thoroughly prepared, at least as far as I could be, for my ordeal, I felt rather sick and faint at the suddenness of the announcement, for Mr Wittam, who has behaved to us more like an angel than a lawyer, told us when we were at his office one day that there was so much business for the Court to dispose of, that 'it was within the bounds of possibility that my case would not come on till January.' This bothered Flo a bit, for she had promised Regy (who is behaving like a white lamb which has hardly learnt how to bleat yet) that we three would spend Christmas—in strict seclusion, of course—at their country-house.

Regy is still in Scotland with friends. (*Quite* middle-aged friends. Flo is imitating Bellona, and has reduced Reg to an obedience I would not have believed him capable of.) I shall have to accept Flo's kindness, and remain under her wing while I am neither maid, wife, nor widow—nor, indeed, properly divorced. For circumstances (I was going to write, fortunately) prevent me from going home. My father is too ill to be told anything—my mother is too absorbed in her

anxiety about him to care much what happens to me—at least, after she had written pages and pages about him in answer to Flo's letter about me, she crossed the pages with a 'PS. I am *too* shocked at this dreadful idea of yours and Nell's to comment upon it. I am positively reconciled to your dear father being too ill for such news to reach him—for I believe it would *kill* him, with his lofty notion of the sanctity of marriage!'

(Good old early-Victorian mother! I am afraid we twentieth-centuriers are more—shall I say enlightened, or advanced, or large-minded? I really think some of them are all three of those things.)

My father has taken a stride in religion since I left home. He has a curate of his own—at least, he pays for him, and he lives at the Priory, though he is nominally a curate of the parish. *Of course*, he is a young man bitten with monachism, or whatever they call it. If the Dad hadn't offered him a tempting bait, he was bound for Llanthony Abbey. Together they have started a kind of monastic life, and get up during the night 'for the canonical hours,' mother terms it. They ring bells at intervals, 'so that the neighbours and villagers may join them in spirit'—in fact, they have done the trick so handsomely that the Superior of the nuns is quite annoyed about it, talks of its 'bringing ridicule upon the Church,' et cetera. She talked of appealing to the Bishop, but that convinced nobody. The Bishop frowns when her 'Order' is mentioned. It is these violent pious delights of going down all hours of the night—barefoot, too, of all things!—and not only chanting and praying but *scourging* each

other (the curate's back, mother says, is positively raw) which came to this violent end.

'Poor Father Louis still goes down every night,' added my mother. 'But he doesn't ring the bell, and as there is no one to scourge him, his back must be getting well, a fact which is quite a comfort to me!'

'You may thank your lucky stars you are with me instead of in that private lunatic asylum, my dear!' said Flo, as she folded that letter after reading it to me. 'Of course, not a decent person ever turns up—and that wretched fanatic of a curate would shut his eyes and make the sign of the cross when he met you—perhaps even scourge the Dad and himself for your sins. Fancy what you would feel being awakened, violently, by the tolling of a bell, and knowing that in the chapel those men were flagellating each other's poor bare backs for you as you lay enjoying your comfortable bed!'

'Oh, *don't*!' I said. It seemed to me a greater mercy than I deserve that I am not at the Priory instead of here!

• • • • •  
We were sitting together at breakfast—it was half-past nine—when a telegram came. 'Kindly be here as soon after you receive this as possible.—WITTAM.'

It was a hurry and bustle, but the motor-brougham we use now—because we are 'lying low,' and don't want to be recognised by Flo's acquaintances since E. P. Delincourt *v.* H. Delincourt' was down in the list of undefended divorce cases—soon deposited us at the end of the street where Mr Wittam's office is.

I confess I *did* feel as if I were going to execution—

a sort of hang-dog, hopeless sensation as if I had really been a dreadfully wicked girl, and was about to be proclaimed as such and sentenced before the world. I envied the tradesmen's boys who whistled and shouted to each other—I envied the huge draymen who were rolling big beer-barrels down to the cellar of a public-house, and when a policeman had to step aside for us two to pass along the pavement I felt he knew as much about me as if 'Divorce Court' had been stamped on my clothes like the Broad Arrow is on the convict's dress. It was a relief to be met with quite eager smiles by Mr Shackles, the fair, amiable young clerk.

'I hope you won't mind, ladies, but Mr Wittam is now at the Courts, and may be keeping you waiting for a minute or two—there is really no immediate hurry, there were several undefended cases to be run through and some decrees to be made absolute when I was over there just now. Will you step into the office?'

He found us chairs, presented Flo with *The Times* and me with the *Morning Post*, and left us.

'I think—if there was no hurry, he needn't have wired in that way,' I said chokingly. 'Fancy expecting us to care to look at newspapers!'

'Why not?' asked Flo sharply. 'He takes us for sensible women, not a couple of asses.'

'It is all very well for you to talk! You are not going to be divorced!' I gloomily said.

'Nor are you in the way you mean. You are divorcing him—and making your appeal with clean hands,' she returned, unfolding the paper.

'I wish my hands were clean,' I moaned. 'I had an awful dream the other night. . . . I dreamt that suddenly Henry stood up and accused me of having kissed another man . . . and I couldn't swear that I had not—and in my wedding-gown too. . . .'

'Oh, bother dreams,' said Flo. 'Anyhow, if it had been true, or were it to be true, you could swear to your innocence, I'm sure!'

'Don't be too sure of that!' I said miserably. I felt so frightened and nervous and horrid that I actually told her of that incident of kissing *him*, thinking it was Henry in that hateful porter's chair in the billiard-room.

'It is a good thing for you Henry doesn't defend the case, if that is the sort of thing you were in the habit of doing, young lady,' she said, searching up and down the columns. 'For you are such a little fool, you would be cross-examined into telling lies against yourself. Meanwhile, I understand now what puzzled me frightfully. . . . Of course, a *tête exaltée* like yours meeting a strange man—and such a fool about women, thinking them either goddesses or devils, as old Iron-sides does—why, it was flint and steel meeting! I hope you won't rue it, though, that I do! Rue *what*? Why, a future with a solemn old Plato like that!'

Here old Mr Wittam burst in upon us. 'That's right! I hardly expected you so soon—gave you a margin—know ladies sometimes require it.' He shook hands. 'Quite well, I see, I needn't ask, I see you are as fit as fiddles! And now, do you mind coming over? I have to leave my clerk with you—have something important

to see to—but I shall be on the spot in good time, no fear of that !'

As he escorted us below, and piloted us along the street and across the road to the Law Courts, he told us we might have to wait some little time. 'The court is so crowded, always, and so over-heated to my taste, that I will find you seats in the corridor outside,' he said.

'It was dark as we left the big hall and went up a staircase, in and out of stone passages that made me wonder whether the architect hadn't been recently building monasteries before he turned to the Law—into a narrow stone corridor dimly lighted by a row of mulioned windows, below which some seats were built in between the pillars. I was too nervous to see things exactly as they were, but when Mr Wittam left us to be watched and looked after by young Mr Shackles, I calmed down a little.

It was the commonplace look and manner of the people standing, sitting, and passing backwards and forwards and in and out of the swing-doors—at each of which was stationed a constable, or inspector of police—which rather shamed me for my strung-up humour. While Flo conversed with her usual animation with our clerky guardian—she was asking him questions at a tremendous rate, and he quite forgot me in answering them—I noted the various persons that made up the crowd. There were some very quiet, respectable men and women—they looked like trades-people in a small way. There were some dissipated-looking men, blear-eyed, blotchy—bored-looking—standing aimlessly waiting until some one or another

arrested their attention, when they began to grumble to them. Barristers in black gowns and those most becoming white wigs strode along, heads and chins in air, mostly talking to some man in their company. One frail-looking lady was leaning on the arm of her solicitor—at least, judging from his manner, he was that. Two dark girls with flashing eyes, very well dressed, were talking energetically to a demure little white-haired man—*their* lawyer, I expect. Then a young man who looked like an Assyrian come to life came up. There was more low-voiced, indignant talk, more flashing of luminous black eyes, and the old man had evidently hard work to persuade them their interests were not being shamefully neglected.

I heard the quarters chime. I saw Mr Talacre come out of a swing-door—he did not see us, or did not intend to see us—he disappeared at the left, at the end of the corridor, where the darkness seemed to swallow the people up as they went into it.

A bustle—a hum behind the doors, and numbers of people, ordinary folk, barristers, came flocking out, while Mr Wittam appeared from somewhere and elbowed his way through the crowd till he reached us.

‘The court has risen—there is one case before ours, a short one, I believe, then we shall be called. There is nice time for a little luncheon. Will you follow me, ladies? You have no objection to luncheon in the room here? I fear there is not time enough to go to a restaurant.’

He piloted us along stone passages, up and down some stone steps until, in a crypt-like place, he opened a door, and we were in a refreshment room,

with tables laid for luncheons, waiters, and a kind of screened-off corner in front of which a cook in a white cap stood before some steaming covered dishes—joints, I expect. But neither Flo nor I wanted hot food. As I took a seat at one of the tables and the waiter enumerated roast beef, boiled pork, and other monstrosities in the food world, I understood the expression, one's 'gorge rising.' I had a wing of cold chicken—I recommend that to any one who wants to seem eating rather than to eat. Mr Wittam attacked beef and vegetables, was evidently hungry—I suppose when you are accustomed to the Divorce Court it doesn't interfere with your appetite—and between his mouthfuls expressed his concern that we would 'neither eat nor drink.' I would not have any wine. All the blood seemed in my head already.

In a very short time we were rushing after our protector, up and down, through passages, until we came to the fateful corridor—where, instead of finding us seats, he said something to the police-inspector or constable at one of the swing-doors and he opened the door to allow us to pass in.

I stood within the court. It was high, but not much bigger than the dining-room at the Priory—and if it had had a pulpit instead of the judge's throne with a canopy, would have been a little like a Dissenting Chapel. At least, it is like the one at home which I peeped into once when the maid went out with me instead of Miss Grimston. Mr Wittam asked us to sit in a sort of pew—these were wooden benches raised one above the other opposite the throne. In the lower ones sat a row of barristers, while some barristers

stood about in what I supposed was the well of the court, talking to each other. I noticed that the three Assyrians were in the pew, or pen, next to ours—also that in a kind of enclosure not far from the throne, divided from the court proper by a railing and red curtains, a number of men sat at a long table, some with notebooks before them. It was very formidable—when I thought I should have to stand up and answer horrid questions before all those men. ‘Why didn’t God make us all alike—have one sex only?—Oh! perhaps Adam and Eve would have grown to be the same but for that wretched apple,’ I was thinking, just as a man came in and shouted something. Every one stood up—from somewhere behind the throne came a man in a black robe and judge’s wig, and seated himself on the throne—upon which every one dropped upon their seats they had previously occupied, and business began.

Some one called out the title of the case, and one of the barristers popped up just in front of me and addressed the judge. His client was a man who had been married a few years. There was one child, a boy. He had believed in his wife in spite of anonymous warnings, so when, one day, he discovered her, on returning home from his engineering work earlier than usual, locked into a room with the man mentioned in the anonymous communications, he taxed them both—upon which they admitted—everything.

I saw Mr Wittam whisper to Flo—he was standing next to where she sat at the end of our bench. ‘He says this case will soon be through, we shall be on directly,’ she whispered in *my* ear. For a few moments

I hardly knew where I was—I am still rather weak, I expect, after that illness—then I saw that an unhappy-looking little man with a pasty face was in the witness-box—a kind of pulpit-looking place on the judge's left—and was saying 'Yes' to the long string of questions put to him by his counsel.

I watched the judge as if fascinated, as the injured husband told his sad story. His Lordship has a heavy face, with a sullen mouth drooping at the corners—small eyes which look angrily at people. In fact, he is far more like a bulldog than any human being I have seen.

He did not stare pleasantly at 'the petitioner.' Far from it ! He had to turn half round to see the person in the witness-box—and no sooner had the barrister examined the injured husband than he began to ask him questions himself, staring at him with what looked to me intense disgust the while. I was wondering whether he wasn't going to dismiss the case when, suddenly, the little man bowed to him and positively skipped down from the 'box'—I heard '*nisi*—costs—custody of the child. . . .'

'We come next.' Mr Wittam leant across Flo so that I should hear. Then one of the barristers below looked round. It was Mr Talacre. I heard some one calling out something about *Delincourt*—then, feeling dazed, I saw Mr Talacre on his feet—I was listening to the history of my woes. . . . My case *did* sound bad as he related it in a very beautiful, sonorous voice, coolly, almost indifferently, as if such horrors were a matter of course, yet emphasising all the worst things. . . . When he stopped speaking—he was asking the

judge's permission for something—I saw a folded paper passing from hand to hand till the judge took it—read it, slowly, amidst a silence which had not hitherto reigned—and sent it back to Mr Wittam the same way it had come. . . .

Then I heard Mr Talacre say something about calling his witnesses—and my own name, called out, 'Elinor Perpetua Delincourt,' made me positively jump. . . .

'Come along,' said Mr Wittam sweetly. . . . I vaguely saw Flo stand up, vaguely felt myself led by Mr Wittam down some steps, across the court, to the steps leading to that awful witness-box.

I went up them, tottering—my knees seemed giving way under me. Then I suddenly thought of the heroines who went up steps to have their heads cut off, and shame came to my rescue—disgust that I was such a craven coward. I was able to take the oath—to kiss the funny-smelling little book, and boldly to stand up opposite the crowd of starers.

For they all stared. . . . I seemed to see nothing but eyes everywhere, eyes that were mostly men's. . . . I averted mine, and resolutely fixed them on Mr Talacre, who was asking me the questions I knew beforehand he would ask. . . . I heard myself saying 'Yes,' sometimes, according to the questions, 'No,' then Mr Wittam was assisting me back to my place, where I began to feel half-unconscious. . . . I was saying 'No, no' to Flo's offer of her smelling-salts when I came to myself with a horrible sensation. . . . Some one was calling 'Juliette Duvernay'—and looking up, I saw the woman my husband, even in his supposed honeymoon, had preferred to me. . . .

Juliette ! Oh yes, it was she—but a glorified Juliette in a most delicate black costume, her little face quite cameo-like in a flower-like whiteness. She hung her head modestly as she acknowledged to having lived under Henry's protection—yes, actually, some years . . . that he promised her she should live in his house after he was married. . . .

I cannot recapitulate the facts which simply shamed me so that, after I had satisfied myself that I was freed from the inhuman monster who had not won me as a real wife, but only as an addition to his wives, I was speechless with emotion. All I wanted was to get home, home—under my sister's roof—to hide my disgraced and dishonoured head. . . . I know, in a vague way, for I could not meet any one's eyes after *that*, that every one was very, very kind—that Flo kept her arm about me, promised Mr Wittam, who wanted us in his office, that he should see me to-morrow, as early as he pleased—and that I clung to her as we drove home in Mr Wittam's motor-brougham—and clung to her still, so that she could hardly, even with the assistance of Nurse Magdalen, who had arrived to stay during our absence, manage to put me to bed.

I could have borne anything but the discovery that Henry had rated me so low . . . it seemed such an outrage that if I had been given the choice whether I would rather have been treated as he has treated me, or killed by him right out, I should have chosen to be murdered.

I was just coming a little bit more to myself, after Nurse Magdalen had made me some soup she had

specially ordered for me, when Flo came in, looking very sweet and lovely in a white tea-gown.

'She has taken soup and champagne? That's all right,' she cheerfully said. 'And now, Nursie, you go down and have your dinner. I will take care of the sensitive plant till you come up.'

'Sensitive plant indeed! I should have had to be made of cast iron not to be crushed by his behaviour to me,' I retorted. 'Fancy yourself in my position!'

'I cannot,' she said, taking my hand and fondling it. 'I never was romantic—a visionary. Thank God, I did generally see things as they are! I certainly over-rated Henry. So does Regy. It was mainly owing to Reg that I believed he was at least a little above the rank and file of his kind. But, darling, it really makes one a bit superstitious to know how retribution has begun in his case. Indeed, the coincidence is almost startling! You ask, what coincidence? Well, you know that the child you saw lying dead, and admired so much, died of diphtheria, and evidently of so malignant a kind that just from visiting the house it must have fastened upon you . . . but there was more that I did not think well to tell you until your affair was over. The mother of that child sickened with the disease—was lying ill when we were in the house—and three days after she died. The two were buried in one grave. If Henry has a spark of feeling left, he is having a bad time of it!'

## XIX

THE COTTAGE, N——, *near Brighton*. *November—th.*

—Since Flo told me that dreadful incident of that poor, deceived young woman's death, or rather, since I recorded it, I have made no entry in this. I was thoroughly weak and out of sorts after I had 'been through the Court,' as Regy calls it—he came back when it was all over, and somehow his 'chaff' picks me up. It reminds me of the good old schoolroom days, when all the wickedness I knew was what I heard read in the First Lesson out of the Old Testament, when, of course, the world was not civilised, and patriarchs and people did as they liked unless there was a prophet about to scold them into decent behaviour. I saw more of Flo and Regy in my schoolroom days. Dear old days! . . . I couldn't return to them, of course, now that I *know*. I have 'eaten of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.' But I think I regret them just a wee bit, like Eve must have done when she sat with Cain and Abel cuddling to her under her long hair and watched poor Adam perspire, as a man would unaccustomed to manual labour, while he dug the 'virgin soil'—which must have been tough work, never having been disturbed, and with the sort of spade which was all he could make, just fresh from the innocent ignorance of Paradise.

I used to think Adam and Eve rather silly. Now I know that every man and woman has his or her

Paradise while they have not eaten of that wretched tree—and that they enter the cold, hard world through the gate of matrimony.

. . . . .

*December —th.*—It was settled we were to remain here—Flo had the offer of retaining the cottage for the winter and spring months—until I get my 'decree absolute.' Regy is with us. He and Flo hunt—keep the horses in a neighbouring stable—and we have the motor-brougham. Otherwise, as Regy terms it, he and Flo and Nurse Magdalen are to be 'sacrificed at my shrine.' I have to 'live like a nun,' as Mr Wittam termed it, and they have to ensure the fact by sharing my seclusion. Regy calls me 'Moloch' and 'Juggernaut.' But he is awfully kind—so is Flo. But the way she has emulated and imitated Bellona is something extraordinary. I often think of an old song a nurse-maid of mine was everlastingly singing (her name was Alice) about a certain Ben Bolt and his sweetheart:—

'Oh, do you remember sweet Alice, Ben Bolt?  
Sweet Alice with the eyes hazel brown—  
How she wept with delight when you gave her  
a smile  
And trembled with fear at your frown?'

At least, that is how I remember the song! Regy reminds me of Alice. He really trembles when Flo is cross, and is in the highest spirits when she is her old, buoyant self.

Nurse Magdalen is here—my nurse-companion—

and her cheerfulness is quite as much a tonic to me as the delightful sea-breezes. For, wrapped in light, fury garments, we take quite long walks—sometimes with Regy or Flo, sometimes only *tête-à-tête*—when her intensely interesting accounts of the life-stories she has learnt during her nursing career make me feel ashamed of thinking much of my own matrimonial shipwreck.

To take up my little record of my ups and downs at the point where I left it.

The very next day Mr Wittam telephoned—and Flo made an appointment, at her house, for the afternoon at three. I was in her boudoir, ready, five minutes before the hour. I had not to wait—as the hour struck from Flo's favourite clock on the mantelshelf we heard a motor stop. In two minutes he was announced. He talked cheerily while Flo drew that padded *portière* across the locked door. When she had finished her careful precautions against possible eavesdroppers, and had seated herself by me. Mr Wittam, who had chosen a low seat with his back to the light, cleared his throat.

'I am pleased to be the bearer of good news, ladies,' he began, in his usual manner of treating us as a species of Siamese twins. 'We, of course, made an application for alimony, and have obtained the very fair offer of two thousand a year, unconditionally settled upon Mrs Delincourt while she lives.'

I saw Flo's eyes brighten. I wondered why.

'Excuse me, Mr Wittam, but I don't understand. What is "alimony"?' I asked. 'And who offers this money, and to whom?'

Flo murmured impatiently, but I saw Mr Wittam give her a warning look. Then he patiently explained—that when an injured wife could show cause for the Court to divorce her husband for misconduct, that husband, if he had any means whatever, was expected to make a settlement of some kind upon the wife he had wronged. ‘I am well aware that Colonel Delincourt may rightly be termed a rich man,’ he went on, ‘but, even with regard to his wealth, we consider this a fair offer. It will make Mrs Delincourt a free agent to live, to a certain extent, where she likes, and how she likes,’ he added, turning to Flo.

‘It will not do that, Mr Wittam,’ I said decidedly. ‘For I would rather die a miserable death than ever touch a farthing of Colonel Delincourt’s money. If I had my wish, I would forget his existence. I shall try to—for while I remember it I cannot be happy—light-hearted—hopeful! But why do you call me Mrs Delincourt? I am no longer that!’

The kind little gentleman was quite distressed. He begged and entreated me to reconsider the matter—not to be ‘quixotic.’ ‘That sort of thing doesn’t pay in these days, if, indeed, it ever did,’ he earnestly said. ‘And I can assure you, my dear young lady, that it is far better to accept what the law considers the correct procedure. One can never err, in that case—for the Law provides for all contingencies. It has no rule or custom which is not based upon the strictest justice, and the experience of centuries.’

Then he held forth upon whether it would be just and right for me to be kept, as if I were still a single woman, by my father.

'I don't care whether I have to go out as a governess or what I may have to do—but take a farthing of *his* money I will not—I would far rather jump into the nearest pond!' I cried passionately.

'It is of no use talking to her, Mr Wittam, she is as obstinate as a mule,' said Flo hopelessly. 'But perhaps it is for the best. Lord Wendell and I consider her a dear and absolute sacred charge until she may elect to marry again.'

'Quite so—so we will say no more about alimony, and of course, Lady Wendell, if your sister prefers to return to her maiden name, she has a right to do so. But there is one very important point I have to speak about before I say "good-bye." May I?'

'Certainly,' I said—relieved that he had listened to my refusal, and that Flo had also, although she was not complimentary.

'You have heard of the King's Proctor,' he said, once more addressing Flo. 'He is the most important individual. When there is anything at all out of the ordinary in a case where a decree *nisi* has been obtained he instigates a strict inquiry into the circumstances and previous history of the persons implicated. His watch-dogs work silently, unsuspectedly, among the parties who have excited his ever-ready suspicions. If he finds no hidden facts, or suspicious occurrences, he ends his inquiry there and then. But if he is not absolutely satisfied in his own mind that everything is square and above-board, he "intervenes," as it is called—which means, that instead of a simple decree absolute being pronounced six months after the first decree *nisi*, he demands further investigation of the

case—it has to be sifted with the most rigorous scrupulosity. Of course, in this simple case of your dear sister's, there is very little chance of his suspicions being at all aroused. Meanwhile, the more like a nun she will live, the less chance there will be of the envious and evil-tongued daring to call his attention to any action of hers.'

'We will live like monks and nuns until the "decree absolute," I promise you, Mr Wittam,' said Flo. 'My husband and I intend to devote ourselves to Nell, as I said before, especially as my father cannot be told of the state of affairs—he is too ill—and my sister the Duchess of Skye, who really made up the match, is so unreasonably angry at the turn affairs have taken that instead of helping this poor child, she disowns her altogether, and myself also, for having helped to rid her of her wretched husband.'

That is why we—Regy, Flo, and myself—are 'lying low.' All letters are still directed to the town house, and forwarded by the butler, who is the only member of the domestic staff who knows our address. It is given out that we are 'travelling abroad.'

• • • • •

*Christmas Day.*—I am broken-hearted. There is nothing left for me but Death—I have no hope left. . . . What is there to hope for? I know, now, that ever since he took my hand and promised to be my friend till death I have simply leant my whole weight—mind and soul, every atom of me which is not gross flesh and blood and bone—upon the mere *thought* of him.

And he—oh, how can I write it—still, I can think

of nothing else. Writing it will be a little less wearing than pacing the room, wondering what is happening all those miles away, and mutely clamouring to God to have mercy on him and on most miserable me. . .

Yesterday whole budgets of letters arrived, forwarded from town. I had got up feeling quite Christmassy, and had danced about the hall humming a valse—while Nurse was garlanding some of the pictures and armour with trails of very pretty ivy—when the gong was sounded for breakfast. At breakfast came the heaps of letters—among them a thin envelope with a South African post-mark. . . . It was directed to Flo. At the sight of it all my spirits fled. My heart jumped into my throat. I had to struggle to speak. I had taken up the letter. Now I handed it to her. 'Oh, Flo, *do* open that,' I gasped.

She was laughing over one of her letters—when she turned to me a look of fright came upon her face. Then she said, 'It must be from Captain Tellson, I asked him to write—don't be fancying this or that, goosie,' and leant back behind the silver urn and pots so that I could not see the sheet she had unfolded.

'Is it from Captain Tellson?' I breathlessly asked.

'N—no,' she answered. 'It is nothing much.' It is from some Doctor de Yung—a Boer, I should fancy—to tell us of a friend of ours who has a touch of enteric, and wished us to know that he was doing all right. You had better read it for yourself.'

She spoke with studied carelessness, and as I took the letter from her began to talk about other things to Nurse and Regy. For a few moments I could not understand what I read. Everything seemed whirling,

unsteady. When I could make sense of the stilted sentences this was the letter :

‘BELFONTEIN, *December —th.*

‘Madame,

‘A patient of mine, Captain Dred Wilmot, has asked me to communicate with you on his behalf. He has lately been superintending the rebuilding of two farmhouses on his African estate, and I was unexpectedly summoned to attend him with a sudden attack which shortly proved itself to be the initial stage of enteric fever. He has been, I must add (although he is sanguine himself), in a critical condition, nor do I entertain any confident hope of the ultimate issue. I can, however, assure your Ladyship and the rest of his friends and well-wishers in England that nothing will be left undone to further the recovery of an officer and gentleman whose courtesy and sympathy have won the esteem of all classes of my countrymen. I have the honour to be,

‘Madame,

‘Your Ladyship’s obedient servant,

‘LOUISE DE YUNG, M.D.

“To

‘The Right Honble. the Viscountess Wendell,

‘London,

‘England.’

Heavens ! And Flo had said ‘it was nothing much . . . a touch of enteric,’ et cetera.

‘Oh—Flo !’ I cried bitterly—I felt as if I could not bear it all—and rising, staggered to my feet and up to

my room. The housemaids started as I came in—they had just finished making the bed, and the elder one, called Emma—she had a crooked kind of face and nice eyes, and was kind to me and Nurse when I was here before—asked ‘Could she do anything?’ However, before I could say a word in came Flo—at which they promptly fled.

‘My dear child—you really must buck up,’ she began, ‘and learn not to give yourself away in this fashion. Of course, it didn’t so much matter before *us*—but I know you would have been exactly the same if there had been half a dozen servants in the room—’

‘Well, they are human beings, I suppose,’ I groaned. I had sunk into a basket-chair near the window. The blank whiteness outside—the moaning of the wintry sea—it all seemed to mean death . . . death . . . and the death of the only one I had to love in all the big, wide world . . . such a one too. . . .

‘Oh, Flo, nothing matters, I care for nothing—everything may go—the worst which could happen to me has happened. . . . I feel, I know—he is dead!’ I moaned. My grief, my utter despair, had frozen me. My eyes were dry. I felt as if I should never shed a tear again.

‘Come, come! You are not going to disgrace yourself, or me, or any one!’ began Flo, sitting on the arm of a saddle-bag easy-chair, and speaking encouragingly, as they used to, to me, when they came with a powder in one hand and a chocolate in the other. ‘And as for knowing or feeling what is happening all those thousands of miles away, it is simply utter rot! I have always found one thinks the exact opposite of the truth. I

should expect, now, that if we could see old Ironsides, at this moment, he is superintending painters and paper-hangers, or something of that sort, and if he could see you now would think very small beer of you indeed! I don't suppose you would like that, would you?'

'It seems such an awful while ago,' I miserably said, showing her the post-mark. 'If all had gone well—we should have heard. . . .'

'There you are just wrong!' cried Flo resentfully. 'Do try to have a little common sense! He would not dream of communicating with us in any intimate way—he would expect us to remember that silence means "all right," in the circumstances. Why should he not write? Don't pretend to be dense, dear! Surely you understood all Mr Wittam's hints about the King's Proctor! Of course, he knew there was a man in the case, and warned you or meant you to understand that with that—one—man—any communication whatsoever would simply—bosh—your entire future!'

'How could the King's Proctor know anything about *him*—and me—when there was nothing to know?' I asked, unconvinced.

'Nothing to know? Not your spooning at the Towers—he everlastingly sitting into your pocket—and you wandering about alone with him in the gardens that last day? Why, I heard of it! The servants were saying "it was such a pity." They knew all about Henry's conduct with that wretched French creature—and they liked you and wanted you to get the better of the couple of them. Well, you did . . . but I question if you would have come off with colours flying if Henry had contested the case. Of course, the King's

Proctor had only to make enquiries at the Towers and he would have found that once more history repeated itself—there *was* a man !

I heard her dreamily. I did not believe in that bogey, the King's Proctor. What good would it do him, or any one, to throw me back at Colonel Delincourt's head—or rather, into the dust at his feet?

'I am innocent—so I am not afraid of the judge, or the lawyers, or the King's Proctor,' I resolutely said. 'I told you, just now, and I never meant anything so much in all my life, I *don't—care—about—anything*—except—to know whether he is alive or dead ! And I mean to telegraph this doctor to ask !'

'I expected you would want to do some mad thing,' said Flo evidently exasperated. 'But you shall not ! I shall treat you as what you are—a bit out of your mind. Meanwhile, you shall know, as soon as electricity will *do* it, how he is. I will write to Mr Talacre, and ask *him* to wire. I will do so now, and send Nurse down into Brighton to post it at the General. He will get my letter to-night, and wire at once, I am sure. *Then*—a few hours patience, and suspense will be certainty ! Will that do ?'

With all my heart I thanked her. With only a certain number of hours to wait I could bear it better. I quite saw matters from her point of view. All telegrams must be open secrets. The employees *have* to know their contents. Only can a code ensure privacy.

They were all three very kind. They went on just as usual, and left me to myself. It was the only thing to do. And now—

*January —th.*—I was interrupted here. A wire arrived from Mr Talacre. It was only, ‘Will wire at once—you shall know as soon as I do.—TALACRE.’ But the fright of it upset me dreadfully.

The weary waiting through that long, dreary Christmas Day was a good preparation for a great shock or blow. Every hour I thanked God that one more hour of torture was over. I have read of martyrs being literally *cooked* by their tormentors. I mused upon their feelings as they underwent the process. I felt as if I were being slowly *simmered*. At some moments I thought of death with a kind of passionate avidity too strong, too overpowering to explain. Life was nothing but intense, penetrating, overwhelming anguish.

Flo was very thoughtful. She tried to subdue all the little Christmassy arrangements which she and Nurse has arranged to give me pleasure. I went to church with them. A young clergyman preached. . . . The burden of his homily was that although we were celebrating the Redeemer’s birth, we were not to forget that in poverty He was born, to live a life devoid of all personal comfort, a life which was to end in an agonising death on the Cross. And—He was our one and only Example.

There was just a little comfort to my scorched soul in this. . . . I slept a little, Christmas night. I tried to prepare myself to give up *all* and to resign myself to a lonely life of bitter, mournful regret within, and active work for others, if I were allowed, without.

Then, after more anguished waiting all through that long, awful Boxing Day, came a letter by special messenger from London.

Mr Talacre had wired to Doctor Yung—and his answer was that my beloved, venerated Friend had gone to his reward the previous day.

• • • • •

*January —th.*—It was a stunning, paralysing blow. I cannot say I felt—well, anything. I was dulled, stupefied.

I went through each day like an automaton. It was not any effort. Flo kept telling me that I was behaving grandly, splendidly, just because I got up and went here and there just as they suggested, and ate at meals, and slept—well, so soundly that Nurse could hardly awaken me (she was sleeping in my room). When they spoke to me I answered. I held wool for them to wind, and when Flo asked me to go on with this or that for her I did it. Why was this? I asked myself stupidly—and once, when I was passing a long glass set into the wall, I saw I accompanied the self-questioning with an inane grin.

‘All the higher part of me is dead,’ I said, staring wonderingly at that pretty but pale and idiotic face in the glass. ‘I am now—a high-class animal, that is all !’

But—where *was* the spirit—the mental part which had endured that agony of loss?

‘It has gone—passed away—perhaps has sought him and found him,’ I thought.

I did not trouble any further. I just went on as I was. It was not an unpleasant state. All thought and feeling gone—only the daily trifles of one’s existence. They read aloud from newspapers and magazines, and I listened with an odd sort of

curiosity rather than interest. Then came meals, and going to bed and getting up.

But—one night—there was a storm of wind and rain; up on the cliff it blew a hurricane—and suddenly awakened at midnight, all came back—I was awake, alive again—alive in an agony of grief which must have been a slight suggestion of the suffering of the condemned—the utterly unworthy.

Hour after hour I groaned, and at last I wept . . . my tears were, in their way, a hurricane. Nor would they stop. I was prostrate next day, and for many days. I took the food they gave me—mixed with tears . . . when they spoke to me, I only answered by the weeping I could not repress.

A doctor came, of course. He tried to cheer me—he gave me medicine which made me sleep . . . but still the water ran from my sore, smarting eyes.

Then came some mild days—and I crawled out into the garden. Somehow, it comforted me to look at the snowdrops and crocuses—to see the tiny green buds on the hedges.

Then came the climax of all. . . .

I had gone to the end of the garden, wrapped in a fur-lined cloak. Nurse had left me to ask Flo something. I was watching a robin hopping about the border and twittering, his head on one side, a little black eye fixed roguishly upon me. . . .

'You little bird—you look as if you were mocking me,' I thought. 'If you only knew. . . .'

At the crackling of a footstep on the gravel path the robin flew off. I turned, and saw a gaunt, tall man—

He came to me and took me in his arms. . . . I knew no more—*then*.

*February 20th.*—Joy does not kill ! Although the sight of him, alive, whom I thought dead, felled me, as it were, to the ground, I presently awakened—in the morning-room, on the sofa. Pungent odours were about—I pushed away a bottle of smelling-salts Flo was holding under my nose.

‘Where is he?’ I stammered, struggling up. Turning, I saw the beloved of my soul—he was kneeling by me—his arm had held me up—his dear, *square* face that used to be round bending over me—his eyes smiling—

‘Oh !’ I said, and I nestled against his coat. . . . Oh, the joy of it ! Never, never can such absolute, complete ecstasy be mine again. . . . ‘You are not your own ghost, though you do smell of heaven !’ I said, and I felt it—but he shook with laughter, and Flo joined in. They were the only two in the room—but somehow, that laughter did me good, and them too, for I had given them a fright, it had been such a long faint.

‘I think I never saw anything so absurdly ridiculous as Captain Wilmot looked, staggering across the lawn with you in his arms, your limbs dangling like lambs’ tails and he looking frightened to death as Nurse and I ran up to help him,’ said Flo. ‘You superstitious little owl, you thought it was Captain Wilmot’s spirit, I suppose—’

‘You must not call her names—she can do and think what she likes, as long as she is alive !’ he said in those deep, true-sounding tones.

I could not help it—I nestled and clung to him. 'Call me any names you like for as long as you like—I don't mind anything—*now!*' I said. 'No, no—' I began, for I saw Flo making signs to me to 'sit up and behave.' (I declare I read those words in her mind!) 'Let me be—Flo—for just a few, few minutes—then I will do what you like. . . .'

'You have not asked me to explain the terrible mistake which my good doctor's wording of his telegram occasioned,' he began, holding me close. . . . It seemed to me that great waves of strength and well-being were flooding me, and that he was as it were re-creating me. . . . 'How shall I tell you shortly? I had enteric—and badly. But at the usual day for taking a turn for better or worse I began to mend. As soon as I heard that Dr Yung had written to you and that his letter had been planned to "save you all a shock" if I died, I made a fight to be well, and started for England as soon as I was fit to travel. As I was in happy ignorance of the telegraphing of Talacre to Yung, and Yung to Talacre, the sea-breezes did their work well. Only when I went among my friends, who all seemed stunned if not terrified at the sight of me, did I know that I was considered dead, and my lawyers had written to Dr Yung for the necessary papers to enable them to deal with my will, *et cetera*. Talacre was quite upset. He said it was his fault. But I don't think so. Yung's message was—"Captain Wilmot departed yesterday." He read it as "departed this life." That is why I came off here at once!'

'I am sure I am thankful you did,' said Flo devoutly 'Although I cannot ask you to stay, except for an

hour or two, much as Reg and I would like to have you. . . . You see, the King's Proctor——'

I sat up, in a rage. I could not help it. 'You will make me wish that man dead—an awful sin—I never wished any harm to any one before in my life,' I began.

'Hush, hush,' the warning arm gave me a little squeeze. 'Lady Wendell, you are perfectly right! I have no intention of paying you anything but a flying visit. Nor will you see me for another three months, for I only came over to recruit, and settle matters with the people who are asking for a renewal of their lease of my estate in —shire. It means another long lease—and I had had thoughts of living there myself. But—the place is only thirty miles from Maybury Towers. I think it would be better to let it again, don't you, Mistress Elinor Perpetua?'

As I looked suddenly up into his eyes, they twinkled as I had never seen them twinkle before. I don't think Flo will be able to call him 'Sobersides' and 'Iron-sides' by and by.

And that was the only hint at any understanding between him and me. Nurse Magdalen and Regy came in. Then there was luncheon—after which he and Reg smoked and we had coffee in the cottage drawing-room—then—he went—he went. . . .

May —th.—The world is riotously beautiful—I am riotously happy—I should like to have the power to make every being on the face of the earth as happy as I am. . . .

To-day I had my *decree absolute*!!!

*June —th.*—Beautiful, leafy month . . . the gabled cottage is a mass of climbing roses, wistaria . . . the rose-arches on the grass-walk perfume the whole garden and hide the house from us as we walk up and down, and talk—with bated breath—for it is a sacred subject—of our future lives together. . . .

The day after I learned that I was absolutely my own property—that the tie to Colonel Delincourt was entirely severed—I was sitting under a beech tree which is just outside the garden—the first tree of the little shrubbery—and suddenly hearing voices, got up, and saw—*Flo*, walking towards me with *him*. ‘Nell! Where are you?’ she called out.

‘Here!’ I cried. . . . Then she stopped short. He came on alone—he took my hands, and looked into my eyes.

‘Tell me,’ he slowly said. ‘Do you—repent?’

‘What do you mean?’ I asked, my heart beating fast now that the great moment had come.

‘Of—allowing me to hope—that you will be mine—my beloved wife?’ he answered.

I gave a sob. I know it was not a word—I could not speak—but I fell into his arms somehow. And then he gave me the first kiss—the betrothal kiss.

For awhile we sat, side by side, almost silently—I clinging to him, he fondling me with a word or two of endearment now and then. At last I seemed to awaken to a sense of lively elation. I could have laughed with joy.

‘Oh! Don’t let us be like those Egyptian statues sitting side by side! Let me hear your voice!’ I cried.

'Let me hear yours,' he slowly said. 'Oh! When I was turning and tossing in the fever last year what I would have given to hear it! I would have given years of my life!'

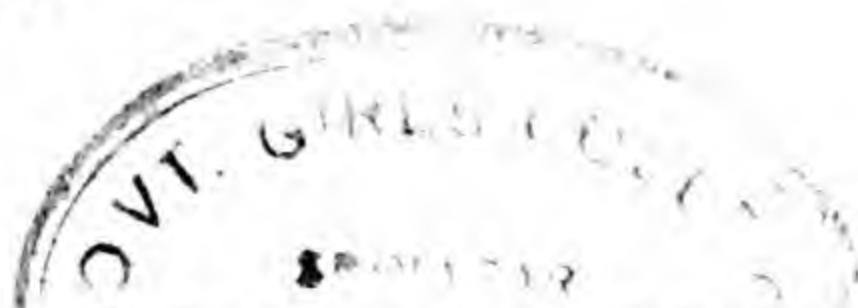
Then we talked—talked of our love from the beginning—of all our thoughts and feelings on every occasion—there was no time for speech of our future. That came later. Pacing under the rose-arches, we plan our lives together—happily, but seriously.

In July I shall, if God permits it, become his wife.

When I think of it, of having him to live for, and admire, and, I hope and trust, help, even as a little mouse once helped a big lion—I feel religious for the very first time. I know that through him, through the joy of being his own loved wife, I shall begin, if dimly, to understand what lies beneath and wrapped up in this human life of ours. My understanding *his* goodness and the loftiness of his soul will help me to conceive the Great, Unknowable Source to which it belongs.

My heart is too full of solemn joy for words. Here I close my poor little Diary. My spirit seems to stand up, singing for joy to the choirs of greater ones—and it is as if a choir of tiny voices echoed 'Amen' to each pæan. . . .

Amen let it be! Thanks be to God—Who loves us to be happy. Amen!



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